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The parent-school partnership: issues of parent participation in culturally diverse schools

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The parent-school partnership: issues of parent participation in culturally diverse schools

Abstract

Every State in Australia is moving towards establishing policies and structures in schools that allow for greater parent participation. Following is a summary of each State's policies in order to establish the context in which this study was deemed as significant.

Having led the rest of Australia in school council involvement in controlling school affairs, the Victorian Ministry of Education in 1983 formally recognised the important role of parents in schools. The ministry's booklet entitled Parent Participation, originally printed in 1985, was revised and reprinted in 1987. The introduction states 'parents have been recognised as partners, with teachers, in affecting educational outcomes, and have been given shared responsibility for making decisions about schooling'.

The Education Department of South Australia, in its policy statement on parent participation in schools, entitled Parents and Schools, states that: The policy puts an onus on schools to reach out to their parents to encourage involvement or participation in decision-making affecting the education of their children while observing the rights of parents to choose the type and level of their commitment.

Defining 'involvement' as the contribution that parents made to the life and business of the school without necessarily being part of the decision making process, and 'participation' as parents sharing with school staff and students in the making of decisions about school aims, policies and programs, the Department called upon each school to develop a policy which not only promoted and developed the role of parents in the school, but also enabled parents to participate in school decision making. The implementation of a plan consistent with each school's policy was due to begin in 1989.

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UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG, AUSTRALIA

Paper No.18

The Parent-School Partnership:
Issues of Parent Participation in
Culturally Diverse Schools

KALANTZIS/GURNEY/COPE

Working Papers on Multiculturalism No.18

The Parent-School Partnership

Issues of Parent Participation in Culturally Diverse Schools

Mary Kalantzis, Robyn Gurney and Bill Cope

Centre For Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong

This report was prepared for and funded by the
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

State Policies on Parent Participation

Every State in Australia is moving towards establishing policies and structures in schools that allow for greater parent participation. Following is a summary of each State's policies in order to establish the context in which this study was deemed as significant.

Having led the rest of Australia in school council involvement in controlling school affairs, the Victorian Ministry of Education in 1983 formally recognised the important role of parents in schools. The ministry's booklet entitled *Parent Participation*, originally printed in 1985, was revised and reprinted in 1987. The introduction states 'parents have been recognised as partners, with teachers, in affecting educational outcomes, and have been given shared responsibility for making decisions about schooling'.

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Defining 'involvement' as the contribution that parents made to the life and business of the school without necessarily being part of the decision making process, and 'participation' as parents sharing with school staff and students in the making of decisions about school aims, policies and programs, the Department called upon each school to develop a policy which not only promoted and developed the role of parents in the school, but also enabled parents to participate in school decision making. The implementation of a plan consistent with each school's policy was due to begin in 1989.

Community involvement in school-based decision making has also been a feature of education in Queensland for many years. The Queensland Department of Education's policy is that 'education is a shared community responsibility'. All Queensland schools were expected to begin work towards their own specific School

Development Plan in 1989. In the pamphlet entitled *Take Part*, aimed specifically at the community, the Department notes 'parent participation has been proven to have a significant, positive and long-lasting effect on student achievement'.

The Northern Territory Department of Education in its publication *Direction for the Eighties* both acknowledged schools' accountability to parents and the community, and sought to increase the parents' and the community's influence through the establishment of school councils. Their more recent publication *Towards the 90s* calls for the community to exercise surveillance over schooling in order to maintain 'a judicious mix of parental rights and professional expertise'. They also emphasise that for a school to be 'effective', it needs to have a close involvement with its community.

The Ministry of Education in Western Australia, following on from the *Better Schools Report* (1987) which advocated the establishment of 'school decision-making groups', is currently in the process of redefining the terms of its devolutionary policy. At the moment, only those school decision-making groups established as standing committees of the school's Parents' and Citizens' Association (PCAs) are under the protection of the incorporated status of that association and conform to the Education Act amendment of Section 23 in 1988. There is concern that not all parents are represented through PCAs, and also that there is a discrepancy between the policy and guidelines on school development plans which state clearly that decision-making groups should not guide schools on their implementation plans and the above mentioned Section 23, which allows PCAs to participate in the operation of schools.

In Tasmania, a range of Departmental documents include statements on parent participation, but there is no policy as such. State schools however, are moving towards self-management and greater accountability. The Minister is currently considering how school councils might best be established. The Minister has the power to set up school councils under the Education Act (section 4B) and a number have already been established. All senior secondary colleges have their own councils. The government provides financial support to the state body of the Parents and Friends. There is an affirmation of the role of parents in schools although formal arrangements do not exist yet.

In New South Wales, Scott's interim Management Review for the *School Renewal Plan*, brought out in June 1989 notes, in chapter X, 'Parent Community and Support':

In schools where parent and community involvement is high, there have been very substantial benefits to the school, students and staff. Special interest groups such as the Parents and Citizens Association, FOSCO, community service organisations, local councils, firms and others have all made substantial contributions. However, local community involvement in many schools is still low and support and encouragement is needed.

The Review consequently recommends that school principals should encourage the formation of school councils which will represent parents, parent and citizen groups, local business and industry and, where appropriate, students. (p.29)

Carrick's *Report of the Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools*, September 1989, stressing that 'few children ever attain their full potential if the early years of education have been neglected'(p.83), finds that children's academic performance improves directly as a result of the collaboration between teachers and parents. The committee recommends that the Department of Education undertakes a 'program of development of school councils with an associated education program' in order to familiarise parents with 'their appropriate responsibilities and roles in curriculum matters at the school level'(p.158).

The Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, under the Disadvantaged Schools Program, in the Administrative Guidelines (p. 42) targets funding for :

school/community interaction programs which assist home/school liaison and the participation of parents in the development and implementation of curriculum programs.

Key Debates on the Issue of Parent Participation

Following is a brief account of some of the important arguments in the debate about parent participation in order to set a broad contextual framework for understanding the issues.

The devolution of educational control and the push towards parent participation/involvement is a phenomenon peculiar to most democratic states in the latter half of the twentieth century. Arguments presented for parental involvement in education range from notions of parents' democratic rights, to the

accountability of schools to parents and finally, to enhanced scholastic achievement for students.

Nicholas Beattie (*Professional Parents: Parent Participation in Four Western Countries*, The Falmer Press, 1985:233), in comparing the histories of the emerging educational, participatory mechanisms in France, Italy, West Germany and England and Wales, comes to the conclusion that:

There appeared to be strong evidence in each country that the new structures were set up more to meet various short-term needs of the political apparatus than to implement long-term idealistic plans.

Recognising a marked gap between the rhetoric of parent participation and the often disappointing reality, Beattie calls for all parties in the process (politicians, administrators, teachers and parents) to be more explicit and honest about what can and cannot be achieved by the new structures.

Likewise, Warnock (*A Common Policy for Education*, Oxford University Press, 1988:22) in her account of the British experience offered the following cautionary words on the issue of parent participation:

There is a danger that parents may become the new problem arising between the local and the national. ... They are spoken of as the 'consumers' or the 'customers', those who in the end have to approve the 'product'. There is a false analogy contained in such expressions. Customers or consumers can be expected to judge a product by their own taste or good sense. They know what they want, and, if they pay, they are entitled to have it. They are in practical terms the experts. Parents, on the contrary, are not experts on educational matters, or most of them are not. Certainly they want their children to do well; they want the best for them. But most of them have no means of knowing how this happy outcome should be brought about.

Australian educational policies, as illustrated above, clearly state that parental involvement/ participation is largely expected to result in students' greater academic success and general happiness at school. While Carrick (1989:81) refers to research studies that have shown how parents without special training or tutoring other than advice or brief demonstration can make a positive contribution to the development of their children's literacy skills by having them read to them at home, the majority of arguments putting forward the benefits of parent participation are based on personal observation or on 'common sense' and refer, for the most part, to the primary years of schooling.

Parental involvement is listed as one of the twelve key factors identified in 'effective schooling', by Peter Mortimore *et al.* (*School Matters*, Open Books Publishing, 1988), in their study which followed a group of 2,000 students through four years of classroom life (from age 7 to age 11) in 50 schools selected randomly from the 636 schools in the Inner London Educational Authority. While Carrick (1989:88) found that 'parenting (particularly early parenting) is the greatest environmental influence on the educational outcome of the child' it is instructive to learn that Mortimore *et al.* (1988:217) come to the conclusion that:

school effectiveness does not seem to depend upon pupils' backgrounds By attending a more effective school, all pupils will benefit, even those who are at an initial educational disadvantage because of their particular background characteristics. Effective schools tend to be good for all their pupils.

They demonstrate that disadvantaged children in the most effective schools can end up with higher achievements than their advantaged peers in the less effective schools.

In 1983, the Effective Resource Allocation in Schools Project (ERASP), selected Rosebery District High School, a K-10 school of 600 pupils on the west coast of Tasmania, as being the most highly effective school both in a general sense and in the manner in which its resources were allocated, against a checklist of 43 characteristics. The school had been evolving its own form of collaborative management since 1977 in order to address major concerns of community involvement, curriculum relevance and resource planning. Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks (*The Self-Managing School*, The Falmer Press, 1988) used Rosebery's cyclical Collaborative School Management (as they termed it) as the basis for a series of seminars which, by the end of 1986, had serviced some 1100 Victorian schools which were adopting program budgeting. They stress that the prime beneficiaries of the system should be the students themselves, and are quite explicit about at what point in the process of curriculum planning community input is to be incorporated.

The recently conducted Australian contribution to the OECD/CERI Project No 6, (Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope, Greg Noble and Scott Poynting, *Cultures of Schooling: Pedagogies for Cultural Difference and Social Access*, The Falmer Press, London, 1990) which was designed to study innovation strategies which had resulted in particularly successful forms of education for the children of immigrants or ethnic minority groups, reported that at one of the schools in the study which had a

relatively successful community liaison program there was some evidence that the grades of the students in the school certificate reference test had improved. It argued, however, that this was primarily because funds were made available for a compulsory languages program which began to provide students with many of the cognitive-linguistic skills that they were missing out on in English, and pointed out that the community liaison program itself arose primarily out of the resistance of parents to curriculum diversification for 'relevance'—they preferred a traditional approach. The school had actually become more effective by listening to the parents and by making these changes. The project found, in general, that in order for schools to work effectively, the sense of community had to be strong. Parents had to support what the school was doing, the corollary being that schools needed to do what the parents wanted. This was found to be a two-way process.

Background to Research Brief

The Disadvantaged Schools Program regards parent participation as a prerequisite in schools in ensuring that the interests of Aboriginal/Koori parents and those of non-English speaking background are realised. To this end it has undertaken a series of initiatives of which this research project is a part.

It was decided to fashion the research not only around parents and their views but to include also other key participants in schooling who impact on the scope allowed for, and the experience of, participation. Though originally spearheaded by parent organisations, the initiative for parent participation now also emanates from government policy and educational theory. Policy makers were thus to be interviewed to gauge not only their expectations of schools in this regard, but to assess also how cognisant these policy implementers were of the views and experiences of parents and schools.

All policy, irrespective of its source, needs the co-operation of school staff, both administrators and teachers. The appropriateness and saliency of the policy was thus also to be investigated from the point of view of those who shape school activities.

Since the object of all school activity, including parent participation, is the enhancement of students' school experience, student opinions were also sought on their parents' role, and to assess family circumstances and expectations.

Parents themselves were interviewed in the light of the expectations of educational policy and school staff, and from the perspective of their cultural diversity. In a circular way, the parents' responses were then to be used to evaluate the policy itself as well as to form a basis to make recommendations about how parent's interests were best served.

The task thus set was a pragmatic one, to ascertain what the real situation was with regard to the principle of parent participation, and in so doing not only provide information about its implementation but a reflection also on the principle itself.

Goals

As a direct result of Federal policy, the New South Wales Metropolitan East Region of The Disadvantaged Schools Program has formulated the following general goals:

1. That community participation be viewed, along with student participation and teacher participation, as an integral part of school-based decision making processes regarding curriculum i.e. marginalising of any group is to be discouraged.
2. That the understanding amongst community groups of issues and debates relating to their children's success in the education system be fostered to ensure that participation at school and regional level occurs from a confidently informed base.
3. That the understanding amongst teachers of community expectations relating to outcomes essential to equal participation in a democratic and technologically advanced society and of the culture and values of the school community be pursued.
4. That a range of alternative models for participation in curriculum decisions be investigated.
5. That community and student participation in school-based whole school projects and in regional projects be a regional priority for the 1989-91 period.

Methodology

In consultation with the DSP, the following research plan was formulated:

Stage 1: In-depth interviews with key informants: DSP personnel and experts on parent participation (approx 5 x 2 hour interviews). To refine the framework,

clarify policy expectations, develop profiles of the school communities, analyse previous findings on this project.

Stage 2: Drafting and trialing of survey instruments (teachers, parents, students): structured in-depth interview formats.

Stage 3: Administration of survey instruments to principals, teachers and community liaison officers in two schools (a secondary school, and one of its feeder primary schools). (approx. 12).

Stage 4: Administration of survey instruments to students. Aboriginal/Koori, Pacific Islander, Greek, Arabic speaking, Vietnamese speaking and English-only speaking groups. Written questionnaires supported by group discussion.

Stage 5: Administration of survey instruments to parents. Interviews in homes with interpreters (Pacific Islander, Greek, Arabic, Vietnamese) or without (English-only speakers) or with liaison officers (Aboriginal/Koori).

Stage 6: Drafting of interim report; discussions with DSP; drafting of final report.

Case study methodology (unlike, for example, voluntary participation in an interview or laboratory work) involves the researcher peculiarly in observation of the subject's everyday world of experience. It is thus potentially much more an intrusion than other forms of research. Accordingly, preliminary negotiations involve explaining the project in full and seeking permission from key participants, principals, teachers, parents and students.

Given this intrusive nature of the research, the researchers' program takes second priority to the individual subject's and school organisation. This is the case both for time planning and the data collection itself. Interviewing, for example, has to be open-ended, with no necessary assumption that the interviewee could or would want to co-operate or follow the logic of the questioning and data analysis. Data collection instruments are thus not presented as rigid or mandatory in form, but more as a structured program of prompts in situation that has more of the feel of an extended conversation than a formal interview.

The particular virtue of case study methodology is that it actively seeks out the detailed dynamics of social process, whereas the tendency in more traditional

social research is to go no further than collate results and infer relationships. If in a given context, certain things demonstrably work or don't work for reasons that can be traced in the details of process, then generalisations can be drawn about the transferability of this experience to a similar context.

Data will be interrogated for its validity and reliability according to the following criteria adopted from R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, Sage, 1984: 30.

i) Construct Validity

Does the case study focus on the operational issues it purports to reflect?

- Use multiple sources of evidence
- Establish agreed cause-effect relations
- Key informants to review case study drafts.

(ii) Internal Validity

Within the case study, do purported cause-effect relations hold?

- Seek alternative or rival explanations
- Check frequency of response
- Check against time series of purported cause-effect
- Cross check different types of evidence (e.g. oral/documentary etc.)

(iii) External Validity

Can findings be generalised from one case to another?

- Compare other case studies. Explain why generalisation can or can not be made.
- Does the innovation replicate previous comparable experience?

(iv) Reliability.

Would another researcher conduct the same study, using the same case study procedure, and arrive at the same conclusions?

- The study should involve questioning from a variety of perspectives, both in terms of category of individual (e.g. parent) and having enough individuals in each category to verify observations or represent effectively the range of interpretations of the cause-effect relations.

With these emphases, data reduction will occur throughout the data collection process. Critical evaluation will thus be the main basis for data reduction, from the very beginning of data collection.

Anticipatory data reduction has already begun before fieldwork in the formulation of the case study brief. Initially, the testing of hypotheses will involve a dialogue between the field and the researcher which focuses more clearly on the salient elements of the brief. Following this, conclusion drawing and verification begins: as well as the raw data, draft narratives attempting to describe patterns and irregularities are written. This process continues, developing explanations of cause-effect relationships. A draft of the empirical narrative of the report and tentative generalisation on its immediate results should be ready in time to allow the researchers to verify ambiguous points, fill in data gaps etc. Key informants should also read and verify this narrative.

Postscript Note

It must be added that more time than was anticipated was required to complete the interviews with the Aboriginal/Koori informants. Indeed a separate data collection phase consisting of another three months had to be planned in order that the Aboriginal/Koori people could be accommodated. It is clear that these communities have felt over researched with little effect and are reluctant to expose themselves further. If Aboriginal/Koori voices are desired in order to present the more holistic realities of DSP school populations then a much longer lead time to secure contacts is required and a more collaborative approach to the collection of data—all of which is very demanding of interpersonal skill and time allocation. The DSP steering committee showed great flexibility and a willingness to pursue this course thereby providing for a more complete report than a rigid adherence to timetables would have allowed for. Lynette Mundine, an Aboriginal Liaison Officer with the DSP, was critical in facilitating this part of the study.

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- In this study the term 'parent' includes those persons in a parenting role such as guardians and/or relatives.
 - The term 'Koori' is the preferred self descriptor of the interviewees that are referred to as 'Aboriginal/Koori' in this report.

CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS

Key Informants

Six people directly involved in policy implementation, from regional inspector level to locally based consultants, were interviewed as key informants. These respondents provided the framework in which the issue of parent participation was being addressed within the DSP.

Background Details

All of the key informants were of Anglo and/or Celtic background and English was their mother tongue. Only one had had any special training appropriate to the culturally diverse student population of the schools they were serving, but all had had extensive experience in such schools. In effect, this meant that most of the informants had undergone something akin to 'on the job training' in issues of cultural diversity.

Curriculum

The term 'curriculum' was seen by all key informants potentially to encompass every single thing that occurred in the school day, although most found the definition of it as 'the things you can have some influence over' more workable. It was said by most informants that curriculum was determined largely by the Higher School Certificate and university entrance requirements. 'The exam structure in Years 10 and 12 sort of dictates content, so the Board of Secondary Education is the deciding factor for curriculum', although the ministry, it was said, was responsible for syllabuses and guidelines and the school executive for seeing that these were understood and observed.

So curriculum is very largely set by the Boards. Teachers only have a little bit of room to move in. In fact the Board only has a little bit of room to move because they've got to fashion things for university entrance requirements, which act as a very strong magnet for the rest of the school.

However, a number of informants said with equal force, that despite the control over curriculum that 'bureaucratic heavies' had, at a practical level it was what actually happened in the classroom that constituted the curriculum.

The real curriculum is what the teacher puts in the classroom and what the child inputs from the outside. We're in the background producing guidelines and philosophies.

Moreover, these informants also wanted to maintain a broader view of curriculum.

... The big issue is whether its just knowledge that we transmit through the curriculum or other things like the teaching style, the way that the school's organised, the way kids are treated, and the student welfare policy, discipline policy, uniforms, involvement of the parents, whether they're regarded as important, whether the kids themselves are regarded as important, and yes, I believe that all of that is curriculum.

At one end of the spectrum, the majority of informants, believed that the executive should take more control over curriculum, accepting the responsibility of pulling it together and guiding the school. At the other end, one lone but forceful voice insisted that the executive had too much control, 'that small, little coterie around the principal', and that schools should become more democratic by devolving more power for curriculum onto the teachers. Only the key informant that represented parents in policy matters expressed the view that 'Curriculum has to be a collaborative process'. However this same informant commented also, 'I don't think that parents generally have much to offer within the classroom itself'.

School Community

Most of the informants viewed the school community to be the immediate school population in the first place, including parents, and then extended that to the local and national community at large.

The immediate school community is the parents and kids and they should be the most influential, but it goes beyond them to the socio-graphic area served by the school, then beyond again to the general society which schools serve to reproduce.

It was claimed that in defining the school community, one is also defining who has a right to influence the school. In this light the new issue of the establishment of school councils was seen as a question of power.

It'll be a problem to find people who are truly representative of the community for school councils One of the real interesting challenges for principals for the future will be dealing with people who become involved with the school council because they see it as a source of some sort of power.

It was also reported that more recently there has been an attempt to involve local businesses and banks in the life of the school, so that they could have a say on what their needs are as future employers. It was said that this has been put forward mostly by the 'bureaucratic machine', but this information could be better obtained, it was suggested by most of the informants, by a general agreement about national skill needs rather than through parochial participation.

The broader perspective of community was also posited. This view saw community as people 'communing, people working together, participating in creating a culture if you like'. This view saw schools as working like co-operatives, without a hierarchical structure.

Another informant expanded this further.

There is a place for people in the wider community to complement/supplement what the parents and the teacher and the student contribute to give a broader concept of wider needs. You have to take account in schools of what comes after—work, leisure, ordinary adult living—all the things that make up our social commitment. So it's everyone's benefit to have that outside influence.

Even within the narrower concept of community comprising the school population and the parents, many of the informants spoke of the cultural differences that shaped school expectations.

For better or for worse, there is a sort of mainstream, a dominant way of doing things and everyone should have access to being able to do those things, to be in a position to make choices.

The dividing line on this issue seemed to be between those informants that were further up the bureaucratic structure and viewed their role as one of catering to all in their regions: they maintained that community involved everyone so everyone should have some influence, 'I see nobody being excluded', and those informants closer to the schools who saw great gulfs in the school culture between teacher, student and parent groups that make participation difficult.

The student body is one cultural group, the teachers usually come from an entirely different background and locale to the students, and in our schools, the parents from another cultural perspective again. Three diverse cultures are operating within the so-called school community.

School Culture

Culture in the school context was mostly interpreted fairly narrowly.

Every school really has its own culture But schools in general do work differently from the community. The school culture has to be based on care and concern.

Two informants commented on the 'high sense of professionalism' and 'extreme dedication' of teaching staff in DSP schools, one even stating,

That's one of the very positive things that's come from the notion of devolution and school-based decision-making. It has allowed teachers to feel that where they've seen a need they can have some influence on redressing that.

Again, one of these informants found that,

Violence and aggression in the schoolyard has lessened in the last few years. It used to be the biggest, most depressing problem for teachers, but last year there were no complaints.

She put this down to the teachers being able to adopt new pedagogy in the classroom which led to tangible results and so raised their self-esteem, their acceptance of the different cultures in the schools, and their adaptation of teaching styles to accommodate the differences.

Another informant noted the poverty-stricken aspect of the communities and their transience. He commented 'the kids are scruffier, more street-wise, the language shorter, more direct.' Another observed that DSP schools were more open and friendly, adding, 'You get the impression that it's more important to actually enjoy school than necessarily get good marks'.

In general, the question was interpreted in the sense of the 'feeling' or ambience of the school, rather than what skills, competencies, languages and values the school population may have had, as culture is traditionally interpreted. This reflected how the school population felt about itself, and that it was not economically well off. There was also the sense from a few of the informants that things were being progressively made right—what with dedicated teachers and the students' self-confidence and enjoyment of school—whilst they still acknowledged that children were still not succeeding in their studies.

School's Purpose/Responsibility

One informant was adamant that 'Schools are not to prepare children for the workplace' and described the school's task as 'helping a child to it's potential, in terms of blossoming forth as an individual'.

For all the other informants, however, schooling was seen to function for a social purpose to do with a specific culture. It was held to 'support and reproduce a culture, an economy', to be 'our way of inducting kids into society and 'to initiate children into our culture at several different levels'. On the one hand the school system was seen to recreate the pecking order with,

the people at the bottom of that pecking order giving birth to kids who will remain at the bottom, while those at the top will remain at the top.

And on the other, the Commonwealth was seen to have the responsibility of ensuring equity and social justice through the funding of special programs within that same school system.

While some informants alluded to the hierarchical nature of social reproduction, most believed that schools should, in some way, attempt to level out the process by ensuring that all students received a 'fair go' at everything. However a belief in individual limitation was also expressed, that is, that not everybody can achieve to the same level in any one area. One informant stated that 'giving everybody the same is not going to finish up with everybody the same', and this is not simply because there have been different starting points.

A distinction was also drawn by one of the informants between the way the public school system and the independent school system saw itself and the effect this had.

Private and Catholic schools make it very clear what schooling is about—what it is for. The public school system doesn't make very explicit statements about what it is trying to do. It's implicit and a bit of a mystery to most people. It wouldn't hurt for it to be clearer about its purpose and its actions in pursuit of that purpose. In that regard it would be more likely to make stronger demands upon parents to provide the school with information which is really its tools for operating.

DSP Parent Participation Goals

One informant stated that the Karmel Report originally argued that in order to break the connection between poverty and educational failure, all those who had a stakehold in that connection needed to contribute to the solution, however they also

expressed some reservations about this, 'To a certain extent that is true. It's certainly not the solution.'

This informant felt that the DSP was missing out on some kind of knowledge because of the cultural barriers between the system and the groups it was serving (the poor, the non-English speaking background communities), and that parent presence might serve to reduce the dissimulation. It was also said that middle class parents tended to bring more money into the school and by their expectations maintained the traditional disciplines.

Middle class parents are very powerful in ensuring a traditional curriculum. The DSP curriculum is far more loose because of fewer parents having any influence and teachers having far greater influence.

As a result it was claimed that the students in DSP schools were far more likely to undergo innovatory curriculum and thereby find themselves in more unstable learning contexts.

It was also reported that parents tended to ask for homework to be set for their children and wanted regular reports on their children's progress. They wanted the teachers to take full professional responsibility for the education of their children, but they had false expectations for their children and this needed to be redressed.

A second informant also commented on unrealistic expectations, but with regard to the students themselves,

High retention rates in year 11 indicate that people see the academic curriculum as being important. They might have unrealistic expectations but they want to stay on.

This informant's argument for the DSP goal of participation was that it conformed to the decentralised model.

The decentralised model is best because it is believed that people who are close to the action, that is, those who are managing the situation, are the ones best able to make decisions.

It also resulted, this informant went on to argue, in the participants commitment to any plan they may have helped construct.

So equal participation means having the forum whereby people can contribute and make their input knowing it will be valued.

However, a third informant commented,

The educators will always have the edge because they're doing the implementation Equal participation is a furphy if you're talking about the actual doing of it.

They also stated 'Parents look to teachers to be properly trained and pre-serviced and have adequate in-service'.

One informant suggested that parents' input be used as a form of resource by the teachers, 'so that everyone can understand the politics of it all' but another claimed,

there is no evidence that student/teacher/parent participation is desirable and it couldn't be equal anyway, because institutions are set up in a way that makes it impossible.

In general, there appeared to be an acceptance that students in the DSP schools were not going to achieve as highly as their parents expected. It was also said that parents under the given circumstances could play only a minimal part, if any, at the school, and students certainly less. Implicitly then, the notion of 'equality' as a goal of participation was questioned.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

It became apparent that, although the majority of the key informants were in favour of parent participation and could provide detailed rationales for such a policy, the policy itself was seen as something that had been formulated and handed down, from the bureaucratic structure above them. As one informant observed, 'It's been a pretty specific brief of the DSP since the Karmel report'.

The general impression conveyed by a majority of the informants, however, was that nothing had really succeeded so far in bringing the parents as a whole into DSP schools. It was said, 'Parent participation is a fundamentally unattainable goal,' and 'I've done it for fifteen years, and it doesn't work.'

Nevertheless, most of the key informants saw parental involvement in schools as desirable, something which could lead to greater student achievement. When probed as to why this was so, the answers given hinged upon democratic principle and the sharing of power.

People in disadvantaged areas are far less likely to have political clout when it comes to funding and lobbying in the interests of their kids unless they are thoroughly familiar and actively involved and for many that's the real lynchpin in terms of parent participation.

[Aboriginal/Koori and non-English speaking background people] haven't been part of the decision-making process in those particular policies yet their children will be punished if they don't obey the rules. They already feel disempowered.

However, it was also maintained that most of the decision-making and the power resided with the Minister for Education and the school principals within the present structure of schooling.

The power in the school over everything that matters—like what's to be taught, how it is to be taught, the assessment and timetabling arrangements, uniform, discipline policy—is determined by the principal and to varying extent by the executive staff.

It was believed, therefore, that in practice there was little power left to share with parents. It was stressed however that, despite this, the new trend of devolution both for school budgets and school management, meant that parent participation had gained a renewed urgency. Expanding who would be included in such processes was thus viewed by all key informants as an imperative.

One informant saw school councils becoming a new force in schools. 'Every member of the community should be able to come along and have their say'. While this informant viewed P&Cs as forums for discussion and not as final decision-makers, they were envisaged as holding a greater decision-making role in the future.

Other informants corroborated this expectation.

I think school councils when they are formed should be equal numbers. I understand that the Department is talking about 50% of parents on the committee,—50% of the whole committee

and,

There are parents who don't see it as their place to give an opinion, but it's a case of encouragement and when people get into the swing of things and understand that they are valued and that they really do have something to offer, even though in their opinion it might be minimal, they feel good about it.

On the other hand, several informants made it quite clear that those members of the school community who did participate were already part of the dominant group or rapidly became so.

Those who do participate become part of the in-crowd and appreciate what's being done The ones who actually participate are like teachers—they have succeeded in the system.

Only those who feel most familiar and confident in the education system participate in it.

In particular, there was concern expressed for Aboriginal/Koori parents and those of non-English speaking background.

They are not going to be represented on a school council if it's elected by the parent organisations and if they're not part of those organisations. There's going to be a big problem with that unless it's recognised at the school level that there has to be some way of tapping in to those communities to get their opinions on a range of matters.

Yet, on the other hand misgivings were expressed about the new power that parents might exert.

If school councils get the sort of power they see themselves as having they might be asking that attention be devoted back to what they see as being the prime targets to do with skills and knowledge and science and mathematics. If you said to P&C 'What would you prefer—a mathematics consultant or a road safety consultant?' they'd go for the mathematics. Yet, in the meantime, they're still asking us to do road safety.

Another expressed opinion was that parents did not necessarily have to be visibly present in schools in order to affirm the school's values. This informant believed that the absence of parents from school could just as likely indicate complete faith in the school.

Many teachers say that because the parents are not visible they are not supportive. I would argue with that.

In effect, 'participation' was interpreted by most of the informants as the school obtaining knowledge about the community so that it can do its job better. As one informant put it,

there are many different approaches and sometimes a fresh view from parents can help the teachers focus on where the child should go to.

Observing that the first thing parents wanted for their children was for them to become 'good people', she elaborated, they,

should have self-confidence, be able to interact with their peers and indeed everyone in the community in a nice fashion that will make mum and dad proud.

Another informant noted that the working class students went to school to Year 10 because they had to, but wanted to get jobs and support themselves as soon as possible. He also stated that,

Working class people are just as interested in their kids doing well, achieving and being part of the professions as anyone else. But both parents and kids give up earlier.

Although the notion of participation by students was also discussed, it seemed to most informants as unlikely to occur and arguments for its desirability remained largely unconvincing. One informant noted that, on the whole, there was little or no participation from the student body. 'It follows, and does what it's told'.

The group most absent in the discussion about participation was the teachers. One informant explained that, 'teachers are, in the main, locked out.'

Strategies for Increasing Parent Participation

One informant claimed that,

there has never been a body of parents at a school who have felt thoroughly informed about what's going on,

and went on to discuss 'a rhetoric of listening but then discounting what parents say'. This informant felt that parents' views could be discounted by teachers and administrators on the grounds of the parents lack of knowledge of the system or current pedagogies.

Another informant said, 'Parents aren't interested in the general business part of it unless they've got a beef.'

Yet another informant spoke of the failure of parent organisations to include less empowered groups from different cultures due to their structure and their constitutional base.

There's no way you're going to get a widely representative parent organisation under what has been happening for the last 50 years.

This informant pointed out that the use of Community Liaison Officers by some schools was unidirectional, to take information out to the parents only, and that this led to some frustration for the teachers who weren't 'getting any feedback'.

A fourth informant stated bluntly that no strategy for encouraging involvement had worked and went on to say that 'the real meat of the debate' is between those who feel that by giving the parents the information they need about the school, actual participation will eventually be forthcoming and those who believe that the system will only be changed through a more radical economic and political education of the parents.

Another informant, when speaking of the use of Community Liaison Officers in an effort to open up schools and democratise them, maintained,

It's a nice idea, but the system isn't set up for it ... and so there's resistance in the institutions because there's no structure to slot these people into.

This informant suggested that, as teachers need cultural information about the students, a data-base of culturally specific information be set up and maintained. But also they stressed,

From my own experience in talking to non-English speaking background parents about what they want for their children, what they think their role is, is that what they want is radically different from what most people think is wanted by the community. No-one has gone out to find out this stuff This information might change the debate a bit.

Expected Outcomes of Parent Participation

Responses to this question ranged from the statement that it was non-applicable as 'the whole notion came about through political expediency', down to the belief that students would actually achieve more. One informant cited, as an example of what was possible, how the discovery, via a parent, of a child's interest in football, and the teacher's commenting on it favourably, led to the child being more responsive in class.

Another informant stated that the outcomes of participation 'were not measurable', but in discussion elaborated that it was expected to empower the child in their life beyond schooling, leading them to an active participation in society itself.

A fourth informant suggested,

If you want to measure it I suppose you could talk about performance indicators If in fact the community are supportive and want to come and be part of the school, that's a good measure Parent involvement is a basic platform upon which to reinforce what the school does continuously.

A lone radical voice insisted,

What are we on about if it's not changing the society that disadvantaged the kids in the first place There's nothing romantic about the working class at all, it's miserable.

The response to this question was limited. No one was really quite sure what the participation advocated was supposed to achieve, although most believed that the children should benefit in some way, whether it was academically or socially.

Findings: Community Liaison Officers

Where possible in this study the interpreters and the liaison officers used for the home interviews were drawn from amongst a group of people already working as Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) within the Metropolitan East Region at schools other than the two targeted for the study. This meant that, as interpreters and liaison officers, they already had a working knowledge of the DSP and its various programs, of the education system and of the structures and operations of a comparable local school. Working at the interface of policy and practice, these CLOs had valuable comments to make on the nature of their tasks and the communities they served.

Background

Three of the CLO informants were the Greek, Arabic and Vietnamese interpreters who were used in this project. Two of these had been born overseas and had unrecognised tertiary teaching qualifications. All three were currently working in the capacity of CLOs in primary schools on a part-time basis ranging from 4 hours a week, to several days. The fourth informant was the Aboriginal/Koori CLO. She had been involved with DSP schools for four years and also sat on funding submission panels for a number of inner-city schools with large Aboriginal/Koori communities. She had attended school to year 8 and had no other formal qualifications.

Roles of CLOs in School Context

All of the CLOs agreed that their main job was to try and get parents along to the schools, however, as one informant noted,

The main thing is that I work with the parents, talking with them, inviting them to the meetings and trying to help them when they have problems, but they can't speak English, so interpreter, translator, is the main job I can do.

A second informant stated,

Anything the school wants to convey to the parents has to go more or less through me, especially with the Arabic-speaking parents

but later added,

Even the parents who don't speak my language, they always come to me if they want to approach the teachers for anything or if they want any help.

It was clear that all informants went beyond what they understood their job brief to be both with parents and students,

I dealt mostly with the kids, counselling them—things that weren't really in the job specification. And not only the Aboriginal ones, any kids that came to me, if I could, I'd help them. I used to sit in the playground and talk to them at lunchtime, sometimes give them lifts to sports things. I discovered that quite a lot were eating the wrong sort of food, so we started making salad rolls. They'd each put in 50 cents and that would be spent on stuff for the next day. It was done from the Aboriginal Resource room. The Medical Centre supplied fruit and vitamin tablets.

They were limited, though, by the hours they were employed and by a seeming reluctance on the part of parents to involve themselves with the school which they generally interpreted to be caused as much by the novelty of such a notion as by the parents having to work.

As a CLO, I'm here for four hours, but I have things to do in those four hours. You've got to try and catch the parents to talk to them. And from one week to the next, they've forgotten.

[The parents] are mostly from backgrounds where parents are not involved in schools and it's very alien to them.

I would like to invite more Vietnamese to come and be involved with the school here, but so far I have not succeeded in that, because, as I know, all the Vietnamese, especially women, they're still working, even at home, to earn money And secondly, for parents to become involved in the

school that's quite different from our way So it's quite new to them and they still have the thought that it's the school's job to look after the children.

Although the stated aim was 'to get parents into the schools' the CLOs also found themselves acting as interpreters in parent/teacher interviews and as unofficial welfare workers for parents.

The job is trying to get the parents to realise that everyone has a potential that is either fulfilled or should be fulfilled, and it's getting the parents and teachers to agree on that balance.

[Parents] can ask me 'if I want to get this, where can I go to?' or 'I want to get my qualifications translated, where can I go'. So I can help the parents with those things as well.

[Parents] even come and ask my advice on personal or law or issues like that.

This wider social role was extended to students also as exemplified by the following comment:

I would have liked to continue, because we only had one for a little while, the grooming class. The girl who was running it didn't stay long. The [Aboriginal/Koori] kids all turned up for it, even the ones who were jiggling that day came in for it. We brought in our own things—creams, shampoos and deodorants—and showed them how to look after their skin and hair. They loved it, and it didn't offend anyone, even those who needed to learn about using deodorants. We put it to them that that's what people take notice of, your appearance, your grooming, when you go out looking for work. And some kids hadn't been taught these things by their parents.

One informant found that, at times, she had been placed in a position for which she felt ill-equipped and pointed out the need for some kind of training to be given to those undertaking the job of CLO.

I was just sort of told we were here just helping—but when you're placed in those, I think they're counselling positions, I think there should be workshops or something. You should know how to handle those sorts of situations.

Two informants felt that they had been serving both the schools and the parents' interests, but one, whose school provided craft classes and survival English classes for parents, felt that the parents were the real beneficiaries.

The thing was with some of these English classes, they got so proficient they got and found themselves jobs, so then you didn't get them in the schools again.

This informant stated, however, that the most important objective was to act in the children's interests.

They are the end result, and if they're happy in the school, they will learn more.

This opinion was put even more forcibly by another of the informants:

The kids came first, for me. If I was helping them, I felt good about it. And they showed me respect for it. I used to call in on the parents, just drop by and talk to them and we had a good relationship because I'd go and see them when I didn't want anything from them. And we still have a good relationship—that's how I could take you to call in on them. I used to drop parents up to the school, if it was their first time there and made sure that they had people to talk to and things to do, that they weren't left standing by themselves. We had a tremendous International Night, one year, about 20 kids took part in it. We went and saw some well-known fashion designers and they loaned us the clothes for a fashion parade for the night. We did the girls make-up and hair and boys took part, too, because they went out in pairs, escorting the girls. It was tremendous, everyone turned up. The hall was packed out, you couldn't sit down, we were so squashed up. We should them that we could achieve—that the kids could walk proudly in front of their teachers and parents. Quite a few of the parents were crying that night to see how beautiful their children looked. It made me feel good. I was the CLO and I worked with the Aboriginal Education Assistant, but we didn't worry about our titles, we worked as a team, for the fashion parade and the grooming classes. One year, to lead up to International Night, we had a painting contest between about 50 schools, in Aboriginal design, but it was open to all students. The response was incredible. We also had Aboriginal Studies and there were non- aborigines in the classes, too, kids who were interested. We picked 17 students, ranging from year 7 to year 11, including some non- aborigines, to go to the Northern Territory for a month. Aboriginal Studies helped for the trip, and all the Aboriginal organisations gave—we raised \$10,000—and we took them to the Northern Territory for a month to see how the full-blood Kooris lived in the outback. And that trip changed people, we all came back with a different view. All the kids had to do a story about the trip, and they wrote pages about it all, and we published it in the school magazine. The bus wasn't air-conditioned, it was about 45 degrees, but not one kid complained, and they still talk about it, when they run into me, as the best experience they've ever had—going hunting with the elders, realising how much the land means to the people

This same informant however saw herself as a vital link between the home community and the school community:

I helped the school by letting them know how the community, how the parents, thought. I'd take the teachers into the community so they could see how hard it was for the students with the unemployment, the alcoholism, the drugs. The kids would still turn up to school, but maybe without breakfast, or without sleep, from looking after brothers and sisters. You need to be able to see these things and I think you need special abilities to relate to adolescents and to realise their needs and interests. They don't have that help now—it was something we did ourselves, making rolls when they were in class—but we never had any difficulties, any back talk from the kids.

Parents' Expectations of School

All the informants were in agreement that what parents wanted for their children from schooling was academic achievement, at least to a higher level than the parents themselves had attained and at best, to university level.

They hope that their children can learn much and be one of the good students and achieve the High School Certificate and go up to university later and become a professional.

and:

Every parent wants a good education for their kids and they want them to be disciplined at school. The parents can see that the kids overpower the teachers and that lack of discipline leads to the kids getting out of hand. It's not like a gang—the Koori kids all hang out together, anyway, but they don't see themselves as gangs. They get to know the teachers, and how far they can push them. A lot of Koori parents and children have very low self-esteem. Their attitude is 'why go for that job, we won't get it because we're black'.

Language limitations presented problems, however, and one informant explained the plight of non-English speaking background parents in the following terms.

Migrant parents usually push too much. They push their children, but if they have a problem, they don't know. Especially if they don't speak the language and they don't know how to help. And they think that the children aren't doing anything. So they're trapped. They want their children to do something and they don't know how to help.

It was clear to the CLOs from the 'Discovery Days', and from the meetings that had been attended by some parents at which the CLOs had acted as translators, that parents were actively seeking to understand what it was that their children were learning and how they were learning. It was equally clear to the informants that the schools concerned felt that the parents had to be educated about the school system and current pedagogy.

We talked about how to help the children at home, how the teachers teach maths at school and we guided the parents to the classroom for them to see how the children learn maths. It's quite different from the way we learnt it.

One community liaison officer who had spend three years at the same school stated,

When I started parents didn't know anything about the school. They didn't want anything to do with the school. They thought it wasn't their responsibility, it was the teacher's responsibility.

This informant claimed that because the parents complained that 'all the time they're painting or playing, they're not doing anything' mornings were organised for parents to come in and see their children in the classroom with the teacher explaining why they were doing what they were doing and how it helped them. The informant felt that this strategy had borne fruit. 'So the parents have a fair idea now. They know what the kids are doing.'

It was claimed that this concern on the part of parents to know that their children were learning effectively was reflected in the reported request for homework.

And some parents when children come home and say 'no homework', they quite worry about it. But I explain to them and I always encourage parents to come and talk with the teacher. Maybe they are afraid that their children tell lies.

It was noted that although playgroups for pre-school children and meetings to educate parents about what their children were learning met with moderate interest and were attended by a few families, the most successful kind of event was of a more social nature.

For the end of the year we did have a picnic outside and a lot of people turned up as well, so it was good. We organised it at Wiley Park. So they came and brought food with them and we shared and we talked together. It was quite successful, that time.

School's Expectations of Parents

The informants views on what teachers actually wanted from parents ranged from agreement about the students capabilities and whether they were working to their full potential, to the suggestion that teachers only really wanted parents around when they needed extra help.

I've been to a few interviews where the teacher feels that the child's got more potential and the parents seem to feel 'Oh no, the teacher's picking on the child'. Other times the parents feel that the teacher's not doing enough, the child has got more potential, and the teacher has said that the child was working to it's full ability.

I don't think the teachers want too much from the parents And I don't think the teachers would like to see the parents involved in the curriculum, or to decide what's being taught in schools The teacher wants the parents when she needs help.

One informant was clearly bemused when asked what teachers wanted from parents.

This thing I'm not quite clear on. I think the main thing is that teachers want parents to help children at home, and that parents can come and, you know, get involved with some school activities so parents can know more about how the school works.

Another informant however was more sceptical:

A lot of the teachers were sort of threatened, when [Koori] parents came into the school and wanted to know how their kids were taught. It was fine to have a P& C that could come and go as the teachers wanted, but they were sort of jealous of their positions as teachers—'it's my job, I don't have to explain to you ... '.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

When asked how they thought the implementation of the state school renewal program would take place in their particular school, all informants felt that the onus would fall back upon the principal and the school administration.

But even if you speak the language, because you don't learn much about the school, if you go to the meetings you feel not up to the standard of the others who know what is happening at school like the teachers and the principal There are a few parents who'd be interested in the school, but you can't say all parents should. You'd never get a full representation. And English-speaking schools would be the same

[Parent and business representatives on a school council] should be able to speak English and they should have finished high school, because then they'd have a better idea than those who haven't. We need people like that who can write a report, or report to somebody else But mainly I think that the principal has to organise it with the deputy principal. It comes back to the school administration.

For schools like this [the formation of school councils] will be a disaster. It's going to fall on the headmaster and a couple of, if you've got some

willing, teachers. It's trying to get the information through to the parents, you can write it down as much as you want, send it out, translate it into a hundred languages, but most of it's written in jargon, they don't understand it anyway.

It looks good in writing, but I don't think that the council will carry out the wishes of the [Koori] parents, and the parents know that they won't. They'll get people onto the council, it'll look good, but nothing will change.

Scope for Parent Participation

When questioned as to the kind of participation they saw as being most feasible, one informant stated,

I think that with the Vietnamese ones, the school can send letters home translated into the language if they can to let them know all the information happening at school, and the school can organise one meeting a term I think just one a term, that's enough I know some parents who really want to come but they can't make the time, they can't arrange the time.

Another informant detailed the problems they faced when they tried to instigate a parent committee.

We have this year started a parent group, we've not called it a Parents & Citizens, it's a parent committee. And we have three presidents and four secretaries and three treasurers, because nobody could spend the time for one person to do it, and nobody had enough English to do it. But if you get one of them to the meetings sometimes, because they've got small children ... the night meetings—I've been to several night meetings—and there's just no parents come The NESB parents just haven't got the ability, or confidence.

The third informant looked forward to the time when parents would be able to make informed judgements about curriculum innovations.

As I see it, I don't think they're going to make a decision about what is going to be taught. Like we have Lego next year in this project, in our curriculum. The parents couldn't say no, and they couldn't say yes, because they don't know if it's good or So parents have to know first, then they can decide No-one knows, even the teachers themselves. Someone came along and said it was good and would help us with [Maths, Science and on the computer] and we're taking it. I think it could be worse than what they're doing.

A fourth informant added:

The parents have to be met half-way. Where are the principal and the teachers when the parents are having a community meeting? The teachers feel frightened to go down to the community, so they should understand how the Koori parents feel about schools.

This informant also spoke about what they had done specifically to facilitate parent participation:

That was the hardest part, to work in the community, to get the parents involved. Because of their past experience of education, they felt uncomfortable, didn't relate to the teachers and didn't understand the teachers' jargon. I reckoned that they needed something positive to go to school for. So we got some money from the Arts and Craft section, I think it was, of the Aboriginal Arts Board, a cheque for \$500 and took it to the bead factory and got all the things we needed to make bracelets and earrings and necklets. We started on a Tuesday, and I didn't have to pick one parent up—they were all there. They made some beautiful stuff and we displayed them and sold them, and the money went back into more beads. The kids would come out at recess and see their mothers, who couldn't help them with their homework, making beautiful things with their hands and were proud of them. We used to provide coffee and sandwiches and it was good for the parents to get together, to meet up. But they don't do it now. The DSP don't realise how hard it is to get parent participation—it's so hard—that's why I took all the DSP down to the community, so they could realise what it was like.

An additional question was asked of this informant relating to the establishment of separately run schools for the Aboriginal/Koori community. She responded with her own personal opinion.

I've changed my views since I last spoke to you about this, because apparently they're going to screen the kids, they're going to test them, so that they'll only take the kids who want to learn, not the ones who want to muck up. So if it's going to be run like that, I'd certainly let my kids go there. It's only going to take on kids who want to learn and make a career for themselves—so if that's the case, I wish it all the best.

Findings: School Staff

Two teachers from both the high school and the primary school, nominated by the two principals as having had fairly close involvement with each school's community were interviewed as well as a community language teacher from the primary school and an ethnic aide from the high school. Both school principals were also interviewed, bringing the total of school staff informants to eight.

Background

The teachers were of Greek, Portuguese, Vietnamese and only English speaking background, the ethnic aide was Vietnamese and both principals were of 'Anglo' background. All had tertiary degrees, except for the aide, whose highest qualification was a baccalaureate. None had special training for cultural diversity beyond study in a language other than English. The range of experience in DSP

schools was from two to six years. The non-English speaking background teachers were bilingual.

DSP Parent Participation

Most of the teachers saw the call for parent participation as an effort to bridge the gap between the culture of home and the culture of school.

It's so that there's not a clash between school and home, that school and home can have common ideas and it works better for the kids, because it's not so different.

Well the obvious one to me is that so we're not working at completely cross-purposes ... For example I just had at swimming school last week and the school sees swimming as very, very important and a lot of parents see their daughters' going swimming as totally abhorrent.

As one principal stated,

I think [participation] is most desirable because I think that parents have a half-share to play in the education of their children and if we never ask parents what it is they want then we never find out ... I think parents have a right to, one, know what's going on in a school and, two, to be a part of that if they wish to be.

However, the other principal argued,

I think [participation] it's desirable because the kids belong to the parents, the parents have a stake in what's happening and I do think they have a role to play for that reason. But there's a long way to go I believe in our present system before that role can be fulfilled.

Claiming that the school had often had parents along to DSP curriculum planning meetings who had 'absolutely no idea about the very basics of how school works' this informant went on to state,

I believe the first thing to be done to try to bridge this gap is to spend a lot of time and money in informing parents about how the system works, how the school works and how best they can help their kids, both by understanding the system and helping them in elementary ways, basic ways, by providing a supportive home to the learning that's going on at school.

The school had made a submission seeking parent participation funds for the next year, but the submission made it plain that the concentration would not be upon parent participation in curriculum decisions, but upon,

making people knowledgeable about the high school, about the NSW education system and how parents are participating in children's learning at home.

When questioned as to the equality of the participation, most of the informants suggested that this was an idealised and untenable notion.

I think that it's a bit unrealistic to think that. I mean people send their children to school because they think 1) they're going to be safe, they're going to be secure for the day and 2) they're going to get an education. They don't want to be so involved that they also come.

I suppose it means that the input of parents shouldn't be simply tokenistic, that it should be a very real input, but I tend to think parents are sort of operating in a bit of a vacuum. Like I'm a parent myself and I feel totally ignorant of what happens in primary school for my son. And I've been involved in a few of their DSP days, and I've just felt like 'they're the professionals, they know what they're doing'. I actually felt quite redundant at the meetings.

I don't think it can be equal, really.

As one principal stated,

I don't see that parent participation actually means parents being here, sitting around a table deciding, for instance, what we're going to do in our maths curriculum It's not just someone coming in and helping writing the curriculum and if you haven't got that happening then you've got no participation in the school.

Another teacher observed,

So in one way I think we should tell the parents, make them aware of what we're doing and okay, we're fine for ideas, but maybe it's not such a great idea to have them have a big say in it.

One informant described a three year old innovation of allowing parents of first-time kindergarten students to remain in the classroom while school was in progress for as long as was necessary for the child's sense of well-being,

They don't tend to get involved. This is what I was talking about the ideal before, because in all my years of experience, they just wanted to watch and see what was going on in the classroom, to make sure their child was happy at school. That's all they wanted to do.

One of the principals felt that,

it's important that we have lots of talking with the parents, and parents know what the school's doing and the school knows what the parents want and what they're doing. That's how I interpret the equal thing, anyway It's really important for children to see that parents and teachers are working together for the one thing, for quality education for every child.

Responsibility for Schooling

In at least two of the teachers' experience, parents generally expected to hand their children over into the care of the professionals, without further responsibility, except perhaps in the case of misdemeanour.

[Parents] see that the teachers and the school, that it's their responsibility, do you understand?. They see them as the professional people who are responsible for curriculum development, and they don't really see it as part of their own role.

I think the parents see themselves very much as just handing over to the school, the school actually doing the education thing and their responsibility being making sure that the kid turns up and is provided for If they're ever called up because of a child's poor behaviour they do see that as a responsibility of theirs that they should intervene to do something.

This view was shared by one of the informants of Vietnamese background.

I think that liaison between the parents and the schools is very important here, but it's not important in my country. Because in my country when they send the children to school, they have confidence in the teachers ..., the teachers do their job, there's no liaison with the parents. Only if there is a problem with the children, then they call them and send them back.

While one teacher claimed 'The child knows that it comes to school to learn', another stated,

I think, for the kids, school is very much a means to an end. I think that the idea is to get a school certificate at the end of it that will enable them to do what they really want to do. I don't think they see the content of what they learn at school as valuable or important.

This informant went on to note,

I think it's close to 30% of those who complete Year 12 who go on to tertiary studies. But I think the kids have very unrealistic ideas of what they're going to accomplish and they attempt subjects of a much higher level than they're able to. And I think there's a fairly widespread attitude that if you turn up, if you're attendance isn't too bad, you get a worthwhile HSC.

Another high school teacher remarked on children's and parents' unrealistic expectations.

We do have exceptional students, who'll go into medicine and things like that, but there are kids who come here with very unrealistic ideas about themselves and where they are heading. Actually too confident, I think, and it comes from their parents' ambition for them, which they in turn, believe, even though the reports are saying, you know, failed, failed, failed. That's why it's important to reach the parents.

The principal of the high school, however, in talking to the parents of low-achieving year 11 students intending to continue on to year 12, noted that 'I found no parents who weren't aware of the students' chances'. This informant went on to discuss the findings of a recent ACER longitudinal study on senior schooling which compared levels of happiness at school and self-esteem with school achievement. It had transpired that although this school had recorded very high levels of self-esteem and happiness amongst its students, it also proved to be the second lowest achiever academically within the groups of schools studied.

It could mean that the students here perform very poorly but it's not something that worries or concerns them or stresses them about school life ... We felt that probably what occurs here is that the kids' referencing is nearly all internal referencing Here, a student who fails in 3 or 4 subjects has a whole heap of other students who fail in 3 or 4 subjects—it's not unusual at all It's probably not until they get to the HSC, that they're in comparison with other people.

They still want to go on and do the HSC But I would suspect that many of our students' get an HSC that you would not dare to present to employers. I mean, I say to the kids 'really, when you get your HSC, you should burn it instantly, because it will damn you for life'.

Remember at the same time as talking in this fairly negative and depressing way, last year we had 4 students go into Medicine at Sydney University, so there is a huge range. Some students do very well here, but there is a huge tail in the school.

It was claimed that in some other countries, students progressed through classes on the basis of their knowledge, not merely because they had reached the right age and that this had an effect on how the school experience in Australia was interpreted.

In a lot of the countries that these people come from, you don't progress to year 8 if you're hopeless at year 11. You've got to reach a certain level. And when their kids get booted on year after year, they just assume that they're going fine.

As one of the informants of Vietnamese background corroborated,

In Vietnam we put a student in a class according to his knowledge, not according to his age. That's the big difference.

It was also reported that truancy was a problem at the high school and that parents were concerned about this. While noting that truants came from all ethnic groups, the principal felt that 'Vietnamese truancy is certainly on the up and up'. It was surmised 'I suppose if a person truants, it's not necessarily that they're unhappy with school, they're unhappy with the learning'.

A teacher from the same school also reported parent concern over truancy.

Administrative-wise there's problems when parents have said things like 'we'd like you to ring up whenever our child is away'. We've thought 'well that's impossible'. We do send a note out on the third day, if they've been away three days in a row On average we have about 100 kids absent a day.

An informant of Vietnamese background described the problem thus:

Not all teachers understand the situation. It's the disruption, the interruption of study, you see. They may have studied for a couple of years in Vietnam, but some mightn't have been to school at all. And when they come to the refugee town they may have no way to study, even in the refugee camp. Some may have a very, very elementary English course, and then they come here. And according to their age, they are going to be put right away into the wrong form, because they have to go to school. According to Australian law, if you're under 15 years old, you have to go to school. But they wouldn't have had any primary school and they have to study Economics in English—you'd have to be a genius to cope with that.

The situation, it was said, was quite different for those migrants on the family reunion program who hadn't had such an interruption in their schooling.

The maths and science we teach in Vietnam is similar to here. So the problem is for them to get the terminology in English, that's all.

A situation was described where many refugee children would be sent to an intensive English course for six to nine months before being sent on to the high school. They would arrive there to find electives in which they might find some measure of achievement or interest already filled.

And they are forced, I mean forced, to do what they don't want to do If they don't attend the class, it will be mentioned that they didn't qualify for the School Certificate, because they didn't attend. The teacher says 'all I want is just that you come to class. You don't have to do a lot of exercises, if you have difficulty with them.' And they become ashamed, they feel inferior if their classmates are better than them.

When it came to the role of the teacher in the educational process, although one teacher felt that 'It shouldn't just be teachers making decisions and getting parent input', another teacher's view was,

I do feel though that the teacher as a professional, as a person who's been to college and has had all this experience, I think they should have more of the say.

A third informant, while asserting that 'a large proportion of teachers do welcome input from parents', went on to say with respect to student participation,

There are teachers who are not willing to give up that traditional role of teachers standing up in the classroom, that dictator role. That's a small percentage. There are teachers who feel that in their subject area, like maths, for example, they're limited. They've got maths and they've got to cover a certain amount of topics. Especially in the senior school, where you're preparing kids for their HSC We did feel that negotiation was easier in the junior school, where you weren't so restricted or pressured towards exams.

The informant went on to discuss the ease of negotiating with a particular year 10 class, because 'they're very mature, they're intelligent'.

I don't mind them giving me input because they make reasonable suggestions, basically. But a lot of teachers aren't willing to give kids too much power.

Existing Arrangements for Parent Participation

The primary school had a very busy social calendar which was open to parents and community members.

There's the weekly newsletter, also when we have our staff meeting, parents are invited. There's a P&C and all parents are invited to that and they regularly write in the newsletter about when they're having their meeting. And the parents are always invited to the assemblies. Then there's sports days, carnivals And at Easter we might have our Easter parade when the kids get dressed up in their hats and everything. And not only do we invite parents, we also invite people from the community, maybe the mayor Sports days, Education Week—anything that we're doing Parents are always invited to come into our classroom when we're teaching. The children have half-yearly and

yearly reports We have parent/teacher meetings where the parents come and talk about their children's progress. Usually the really concerned parents will come.

The principal, however, had reservations about the effectiveness of the P&C.

We've had great difficulty in getting a P&C to go along in a developmental way. It's just petered out through lack of someone to hold it together at the top We had twenty people or so at the first meeting, but they were unwilling to take an executive role in it, so there was no real basis for it to run. And I found that I was always the one upfront doing the thing and that's not what I see a P&C being about.

This informant also enumerated other occasions of parental involvement throughout the year.

With kindergarten orientation there are two days. The parents come up on the Tuesday in the beginning, and on the Thursday they come back and actually go into the class. They are absorbed into the present kindergarten class.

The Child Protection things were very well attended. For the Fair Discipline Code, we sent home a parent survey and then we had a meeting up in the library, which I addressed and which was good, so that we could get their ideas, but there's a breakdown of the parent response by ethnic group to that survey which was really interesting. We sent out a letter to our parents with a discussion on what had come out of it and the general sort of feelings about it They do need that feed-back because otherwise they do feel that they're not being listened to, that nothing ever comes out of it.

The report system was explained.

In the newsletter I've asked that the reports come back to school, there's a place for the parents to sign on the front and to write a comment if they wish. When they come back to school with the signed report, they can take them home and the parent can keep them. That's the best way we can do it.

Ideally, the parent would bring the report back to the school and sit down with the teacher to talk it through.

At the moment, the parents are invited to come, if they'd like to. We did try to do that in my first year here and I think some teachers only had one parent who came. But it's something that's got to be built up, so that the tradition is thereThe teachers felt, when they made the time and they stayed and organised their own children at home, a bit dispirited sitting there till 5 o'clock for one person to come.

A different approach to the reporting of progress was suggested.

I'd like the teacher to have a folder of each child's work. The child would choose the work that they wanted their parents to see In a piece of writing you would look at the structural thing, that (the parents) understand that this is the way you write a report, that sort of thing You'd do the same in maths, and have a sample there. This to me is the best way of showing parents how a child is progressing. A mark doesn't mean anything. We'd started to do this at my previous school, that was the way we worked. It was a very different sort of school. There were no NESB parents.

The opportunities afforded by the high school for parent contact were reported to be fewer in number and more formal than those of the primary school.

We have a series of parent meetings during the year. There's two types of meetings, basically. There's the parent information-type meetings where we contact parents in a specific target group—say, Year 7 information night ... where we separated them into language groups, basically Greek, Vietnamese, Arabic and English speakers, and we've had four teachers, and in each group there's an interpreter. And the teachers have four topics—one may be how the school reports, another one might be the choices the students make in year 8, another one might be school rules and the fourth one might be the NSW education system, and in the course of the evening the four of us just rotate, using the interpreters. It's effective, but it's an incredibly wearing night. But the meetings this year, we didn't do that, we asked the kids to come up [with the parents], and that seems to work.

One of the teachers told of her experience of such meetings.

We told them exactly what happens when [the students] are late, when they're truanting, just the whole procedure of what happens in school. That on sports days they're sent home, that they're required to wear uniform. Basically just information. They took well to that. I was translating for the Greeks, which was good. I mean, it varies—a lot of them commented on the way teachers look. The way teachers dress, certain teachers dress who don't look like teachers. All that sort of thing.

The principal described the second type of meeting.

The second one that we have and that every high school has is a parent/teacher night. On that occasion, it's twice a year, parents come up to the school after reports have been given out and they can take advantage of the fact that teachers are all there. That doesn't really work very well here. In middle-class areas, you might have four hundred parents come up, here we think it's a big night if we have 70 to 100 parents come up. We have open days and exhibitions during Education Week, but again, parent attendance is pretty low.

Another teacher described the experience of advising for a year 7 reporting process, and detailed the complicated roll system in place at the school.

The information I get tends to be very negative, in that, when there are problems, the teachers sort of let me know, and if I'm getting a lot of problems from different areas about a particular individual, then I'll contact the parents and get them up to talk about it with them, the idea being that the parent will then turn round and say to the kid, 'this isn't acceptable' and the kid'll toe the line. I don't get positive things, except at report time, which is twice a year. So twice a year every teacher writes a report on every kid they teach, and then I read all those reports and add any comments that I wish to make or summarise the teachers' comments or whatever. So I do get that information on every individual, but it's happening in a really big hit, so it tends to degenerate just a bit. There's 120 kids in year 7. We have a vertical roll call system here, and the roll call teacher and the roll call class form a family group. Little kids up to big kids, and the roll call teachers give them the reports and actually discuss it with the kids. This is how it works in theory. In practice, I think a lot of roll call teachers just give them out ... and then the kid takes the report to the parents. So maybe all the reports don't get home. The parents are told that there are two reports a year, and that they should expect two They're told that at the beginning of year 7, when you actually get them to sign forms and all the rest, but I should imagine what they're told on that day doesn't sink in too well. A lot of things happen on that day.

It was claimed however that there was another subtle pressure that ensured that reports would be taken home.

Also with the different ethnic communities, they're much closer to each other than they are to us, of course, and I think there's a lot of communication within them ... I know a few times kids have told me it's no good them ditching their report, because their mother will expect it because their cousin's going to get one.

The principal had found the innovation of special consultations with the parents of some Year 11 students constructive, but could foresee problems in terms of the time available.

But what we started this year with the Year 11 kids, we made sure that reports were given out to students by head teachers and the head teacher interviewed each child personally about the report and then the kids whose results were worst I had these meetings with parents individually. I thought that went pretty well, and I'm going to try to extend that, where we have more personal consultations with parents about student performance. I met lots of parents I hadn't seen before at the other two types of meetings that we held, so it might be a way to go, but obviously it's very time-consuming, to have one-to-one meetings. It's not a very good industrial climate to ask teachers to be doing that at night, either.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

On the whole, responses were fairly sceptical, not only with respect to the reasons behind the devolutionary move, but also with respect to the effective establishment of a truly representative council.

The biggest problem would be that it mightn't be representative of the parent body as a whole. Maybe it would be the English-speaking parents that would not monopolise it but be basically in control, because they have the language skills and all of that.

I'm talking now in terms of maybe different politics, different philosophies ... I just tend to feel that migrant parents tend to push more for the 3Rs. It's critical, it's so important for their children to function well here. Whereas some of the Australian parents would want more of the creative side, push more for a relaxed learning environment—that's the conflict that came immediately to my mind.

Obviously they are trying to become private. If you're going to get businesses backing you, that's privatisation, isn't it, because they're going to be putting money into the school. Because the government doesn't want to give the schools any more money. We're poor enough as it is. You could probably get two or three parents for the council here, that would really stick by it ... because they probably understand it more and have a bit more time.

The principal of the primary school instanced the difficulties in keeping the P&C running.

So in view of that, I don't know that a school council would be ... I can't see it really happening here, but I think it would be wonderful, really marvellous. But I don't think people feel comfortable in being involved in that sort of thing. And if you force people into it, you're going to end up getting four or five of the Anglo Australian parents and that's just moving the management from the teachers to a similar group of people who are not representative of the parents at all. Our main groups are Greek and Vietnamese.

So I think that in a school like this, if a school council is brought in, it will just devolve back onto the principal and the administrative staff of the school. But what frightens me is people seeing the school as a stepping-stone to something else. I've been in schools where, say, the president of the P&C has used that to move into local council and then on to something higher. Personal agendas can be a problem.

One of the informants of Vietnamese background was convinced that his community would not be involved.

For myself, I don't think it will happen. I don't think we can get the participation of the Vietnamese parents for a school council. When they come for a meeting for the discipline and trouble with their children, they only want that the meeting is as short as possible—five minutes, ten minutes—that's what they want. So I think that we can't expect the participation of the Vietnamese parents. No, definitely not.

The high school staff were similarly critical of the move.

Well I feel very cynical about it from the government's point of view, in that they've done something similar with the secondary bursary scheme. They used to actually have a means test and give the money to the families whose incomes were below a certain level. But what they do now is give the schools the money and say 'you spend this on the needy kids because you're closer to the problem than we are'. But the amount of money they were giving the schools was exactly a quarter of what they were giving the families. And so I think that that was just a cost-cutting exercise that was disguised in the philosophy of this school renewal bizzo.

Teachers are not happy about the Scott Report, but then people do fear change. Schools would become more competitive for teachers.

Inter- and intra-ethnic rivalry was also mooted.

I think probably what will happen is you've got different ethnic organisations like say, you've got the Greek community, and you've got the Greek archdiocese and I think they might sort of rival each other to see who gets a representative on it. But I don't think that you're going to have average parents who are keen and committed, and who other parents see as keen and committed and vote for, anything like that. Either parents will have to be co-opted, or maybe it will be seen as something to have on a curriculum vitae, in some sections of the community, so people will do it for that reason.

I think the school council is a good idea, a good concept. But we will certainly need a community liaison officer or interpreter, something like that. And it would depend on the number of ethnic groups we have in the school—so we'd have one representative of each ethnic group on the committee.

The high school principal explained,

One of the things that's come out is that it's not going to be compulsory and each school will approach the question appropriately. So it will probably come down to the principal in each school deciding what to do. I would hope that by the end of next year, we will have made some greater contacts with the parents than we have at the moment which might lead to parents coming to the party on the matter and I'd be very happy for that to happen.

Strategies for Parent Participation

Several informants were fairly nonplussed when asked to suggest a workable model for parent participation in their schools. As one teacher said,

Parents should be maybe surveyed or something and their responses It's very difficult if they're not coming up to the school. But I don't think it should just be always coming from the school going down, it should be both ways. But I don't know how you'd go about it.

Some teachers advocated those strategies already in place.

When they see the child doing a play or dancing or singing—that's what they really like. That's a good way of bringing parents in.

Whenever we have picnics, like tomorrow we're having our yearly picnic...the parents of the infants usually come along ... probably because the children are younger ... but they enjoy themselves and they like to help us out. If we need help, say a watermelon needs cutting or something, they help us out.

I think for the Vietnamese people it is very hard ... for normal things, when there is no trouble at all, they don't come. And we have to send a newsletter every week to them and they just read it and follow what we tell them to do.

I think that most of the teachers are willing to listen to the parents if the parents come to talk to them, but if not, they can't go to find the parents every day, it would take too much time. So I think it's very important for the school to have a community liaison officer who can make visits.

One teacher spoke of plans for opening up channels of communication between the school and its community in the coming year.

My role here next year will be more a school community liaison officer where I do contact the parents and establish some sort of liaison with the parents in the community and I recently attended an in-service course on how schools can gain access to media, like radio and newspapers and actually let the public know what's happening in the school, by publicising events or by giving credit to students who've done exceptionally well Basically, going on the literacy background of parents, we found that radio was a good medium to inform parents.

Another teacher commented on the effectiveness of home visiting.

The swimming incident was actually solved by a teacher going around and visiting all the parents, and the parents agreed that their daughters could go swimming in the end. But I think it was as much intimidation by the authority of the school as agreement that this was a good and constructive thing.

This same teacher found it hard to visualise a workable model for parent participation for the following reasons.

See, it's very hard because the whole system is oriented towards the HSC, and to maximise your marks in the HSC, which sort of seems to be the *de facto* role of the school. And I think in the main that's what most parents want, and the majority of kids, that's what they want, even though the aims and objectives of the school aren't couched in terms of maximising HSC aggregates Now if parents agree that they want their kids to get into university or the CAE or whatever, there's not really much more than a sort of back-up role they can play, of providing the environment at home, and encouragement, you know, that sort of thing, that I can see.

I mean it would be ideal if parents were truly involved, but the only level of involvement they can understand is going off on picnic days, and things like that which aren't really the guts of the issue.

Both principals recognised that the issue of homework was constantly raised by parents and had come in their own way to regard a model form of parent participation to be informed support and guidance in the home.

When the children go home to their parents, that's when their side of the equal participation comes in, or their equal share in the education, in as much that they've been to the school and they know what's happening here and they can then carry that on with something at home, so that when we write on reports 'it would be really good if Chito went to the Municipal Library and borrowed some books for you to read to him'

Parents who know about how the school works, parents who know how a parent can help a child at home—that is also a disadvantage that our kids suffer from, because their parents do lack those knowledges and those skills I see so many differences amongst my friends as teachers, they're parents who know how to help their kids, not to be convinced that a big factor in improving outcomes for kids in DSP schools is to be helping parents to help their kids.

The problems of set homework, it was claimed, were compounded, in the primary school, by Departmental guidelines in opposition to the more traditional expectations of parents, and in the high school, by the sheer number of subjects being studied by any one class.

The Department has a policy on homework That it wasn't to be one where children went home and worked for an hour and a half on algorithms or doing tasks that took a lot of thinking at that time of the day because that wasn't good for children I've found it most successful when the teacher sets some sort of contract for the week of work, and the children either do it all in one go, or spread it out over the time There's not often a lot of written homework, unless they're finishing off

something Quite often we're concentrating on problem-solving techniques and things like that so that children working out a way to solve a problem, mightn't always mean them getting the right answer and it's very difficult for any parents to see that that's as valid work for a child to do at home as fourteen set problems.

It's up to the policy of the individual teacher as to whether or not homework is given. And, in fact, homework would be given by most teachers at various times, but it's uncoordinated—I've never seen a school that's been successful in co-ordinating it, so Homework can quite easily be a feast or a famine situation But if parents understand that study homework can be done, if they understand that the biggest disadvantage our kids have is language skills and if we convince them that the more you read, the better you learn, so that students should always have a book—if kids say they haven't got any homework, you can say 'well, what sort of revision study can you do?' And if they say there's no revision study, you can be saying 'what about reading your library book? Tell me about it. How many library books have you read this month?'

All informants could name various strategies that had been tried to bring parents into the school and elicit some form of participation, with differing successes over the past few years. A kindergarten teacher had this to say:

The most important thing of all was that in the beginning week, we encouraged parents to stay with the children ... not that many children have had pre-school experience here, so it's quite different from other areas, and that's what makes it more traumatic in many ways because they haven't had that separation ...that's been quite successful in the early stages of kindergarten. There is a special parent area in my room, where there are chairs specifically for parents and they come and sit there and usually observe. That's what I was going to get into, it's hard to get them past that stage.

Another primary school teacher told of the school's endeavours to involve it's students' parents in sundry activities.

We're always inviting parents, always saying come to this and come to that. For the kindergarten kids, they might have their library day and the parents come in with their library book and they sit in the library and choose a book for their child, in a different language, their mother tongue or maybe in English. But we're always, because we translate our weekly newsletter to the parents, we're always writing parents are welcome, parents are welcome.

Every Thursday afternoon we have assemblies, and one class will put on an item—say a play or something like that—and another will do a display. And they rotate, they do that every week, and one class presents the assembly. And you find, at about three o'clock, when the parents come to pick up their children they want to come in and look at what we're doing. We've had some Greek songs that we've done ... but only because they had to come to pick up their children they come in and watch. If I've

asked them 'look, we're going to be doing this' they might come, but a lot of the time not many parents come because of the fact that they're working.

An informant of Vietnamese background spoke of the financial plight of many Vietnamese families.

They spend all their time working to pay the bills, and saving money to send back to Vietnam, to pay their debt to the organiser who assisted. And sometimes it costs a lot of money, you have to work for five or ten years to pay it off.

The community language teacher spoke of the effectiveness of personal contact.

When we call for the parents to come, by name, they come and I interpret for them. And they feel very easy here.

The principal of the primary school discussed other strategies.

I think quite often the sausage sizzle is a good way to start off and we don't leave it there, we try and invite them to other things. It's not much use inviting parents up to the school unless they can see there is a reason to it So what we were thinking of doing is—we're buying a whole lot of maths Lego material and see, they think that the children are playing and not really learning, so we were going to in-service parents on that In the handwriting actually we did some in-servicing of parents and that had a better turn-up.

Reports on the situation in the high school were somewhat conflicting.

The recent [meeting] we mailed letters in all languages, but in the past I've rung all the parents. I think in a way, too, a lot of the time, information doesn't go home. Ringing I find works because they think 'well obviously they've rung me, it's important enough' and they sort of feel obliged to come because they've spoken to you.

We employed a Home/School Liaison Officer for a number of years—a Greek one and a Lebanese one and a Vietnamese one to actually liaise between home and school. To the best of my knowledge, they weren't successful. Well, I didn't pick up any information from them about the parents See, one of the things they were used for was to try and get parents to come to, say, a speech day or a parent/teacher evening. Like where every parent was contacted by them and told it's on. Not just giving the kids notes to take home, which often don't get there. But it didn't really significantly change the number of parents that turned up.

One teacher spoke of parent attendance at staff workshops on the syllabus.

When we've had staff development days, where teachers are involved in workshops on the syllabus, the parents are also invited. For example there was a workshop on Language Across the Curriculum and parents were invited to attend You do get a few, but I think their worry there is the language, and they feel slightly intimidated about the whole day, a thing like that.

When asked to characterise the parents that did attend, the reply was,

They're practically all English-speaking. They'd be P&C types. But we don't have a P&C at the school, maybe that's one thing we should look at, re-establishing the P&C. There used to be one, and it was mainly made up of Anglo-Saxons.

School-based curriculum courses, suited to students who wished to stay on at school, but not matriculate, were seen by the same teacher as 'most successful'.

I think that this school is very flexible in terms of we really try to tune in to the kids and we cater for, for example we have quite a number of OAS [Other Approved Studies] courses There are a lot of courses that all have a lot of programs like Peer Support that raises the self-esteem of the kids. I think we're doing far more of that type of thing recently than actual just face-to-face teaching in the school. We really tune in to just the needs and background of the kids.

There were parents who didn't know that there were non-matriculation and matriculation courses. Through those meetings, a lot of them said 'well yes, my student isn't doing very well, maybe my son or daughter should be doing a course in the travel industry because that's what they really want to do.

The principal of the school took a slightly different perspective on such courses.

The central constraint to the NSW system is that the HSC is an external examination and that filters right down through the system and shapes it. Where there are areas where we can operate as a school in curriculum, what are called the Board Approved courses, because these are not counted as part of the tertiary entrance score and in fact don't count towards matriculation, those sorts of courses are never going to become the road to full adulthood. They're stunted creatures because of that non-recognition. That's an area where the school can respond to parental wishes and to community needs, possibly.

But even there there's great constraints. If parents come up to me and say 'why can't we have Vietnamese and Arabic classes at school', now it's very, very difficult to do that because there are very few Vietnamese and Arabic teachers in the system. It's possible to do a little experimental work on the fringe ... but it's not easy to introduce the needs of the community or wishes of the parents in the curriculum if the system can't fulfil those needs.

The Vietnamese Ethnic Aide from the high school discussed his role in the publication of an open letter to the Vietnamese community, undertaken from his 'own goodwill' and not in his capacity as part-time aide at the school.

I intend to encourage the Vietnamese community living around [the area] to form a Vietnamese Parent Association. I am dealing directly with the Vietnamese social worker at the community centre. I co-operate with him in trying to do this. The open letter was published many times in the different Vietnamese newspapers. There hasn't been a meeting yet, because we only began this two months ago. We have to wait—the reaction is very, very slow. At the moment, I know that the Vietnamese are too busy. Too busy with their new life, to catch up what they lost in Vietnam, so they work very, very hard.

This informant took a long-term, but optimistic view.

So I think that step by step the Vietnamese in the future will realise, in 5 years, 10 years—those who came here 10 and 15 years ago, now they have time enough to spare for the problems of their children. They realise the importance of liaison between home and school, but for the newcomer it is very, very hard. I'm not hurrying the parent association, but it will happen for all the Vietnamese community because in the future those kids will become parents and they will have their duty as an Australian and also as an ethnic Vietnamese.

Expected Outcomes of Parent Participation

The majority of informants felt that students would achieve more if active parental participation was occurring.

The children would achieve better. There'd be no conflict between school and home. They'd both mesh. Oh well, not conflict, but maybe difference—maybe parents are not happy with what's going on. I don't really mean conflict, I mean if there was that ideal input, all would mesh beautifully and ultimately children would do better at school. Common goals. I think that's what it all boils down to, at least, for educational outcomes.

Another primary teacher thought that parents would help their children more in the home.

Hopefully ... it's good to get parents helping the kids at home. I'd really like that. I mean the parents at our school can't help their kids at home with English. Anything to do with language, they can't help them. What I was trying to get at was parent help at home and more giving time to your child, instead of just sticking them in front of TV ... I don't mean to put down the parents, but I think they do have time.

The principal expanded upon the theme.

I think there'll be far greater trust between teachers and parents, if participation as I've defined it happens. The outcome is that the education of the child will be of really high quality That sort of feeling of trust and a close relationship and interaction between parents and teachers is to the advantage of the children and their education ... I think that's the only time that the child's education will ever really reach it's potential.

If you're judging educational outcome by the HSC, which is what most governments do, most people do, then yes, I do believe it can be seen in academic performance I don't mean that everyone's going suddenly to work at 100% above People have an IQ and though it's not the beginning and the end, it does set people on a bit of a continuum, but it means that parents also understand that a child who can achieve at this level and is achieving at this level, who's doing the best that it possibly can, then that child is as 'good' as the kid who gets 498 for an HSC exam.

One high school teacher saw participation as being valuable 'only if the parents are antagonistic towards the school and they stop being antagonistic'. This informant compared his experience at another DSP school, which was 'entirely Anglo', with the current high school.

Going back to teaching at ____ , there was an enormous amount of antagonism between the school and the community. The school was seen as that place the law tells you you have to send your kids to. Like the kids were very negative, but the parents were very negative too It was like the school was one of the few points of contact between the community and the whole Australian power structure to which most parents felt very negative ... They were just sort of handing over their rent each week and getting the dole in and occasionally the dole might be interrupted. The school was one place where they actually saw people, so they, sort of, registered their protest I can see there how you could get enormous benefits by the community and the school working together. But the parents here tend to be very supportive of the school, just not prepared to get involved They definitely see education as the way for their kids to rise up. So they are very supportive of it, but at the same time they are so far removed from it that they are pretty unrealistic about what their kids can do ... and I think those parents would just say 'we don't understand what's happening, you people understand, so ...'.

The second high school teacher looked towards another form of parental aid.

Parents could even help us. A lot of parents have children that are wonderful at home. They may have no idea that their child suddenly transforms into a monster once they get here.

When asked what was expected as a result of the ideal participation, this informant replied 'I think, for example, improved performances in students, I really do. 'And continued by broaching the subject of the school's image.

I think it also would help to sort of boost the morale of the school if parents are involved and the community's involved ... and we've got a reputation at the school as well. And the kids' self-esteem, they sort of identify with a school that's doing great things. It's hard to get credit for what you're doing, I think, but if you can do it on a very large scale, and people are aware of what's happening, then you've sort of made it

The school newspaper is produced twice a term, and sent to Shoppers Plus and the Sydney Morning Herald, and that boosts the school image.

The high school principal qualified the process by which the expected improvement in students might be obtained.

Well I think if the aims of what we're trying to do are successful, then I think the students will do better in their school. I think they'll do better academically and I think even problems like truancy could improve, with the parents knowing more about it. I believe the sort of thing we're doing can actually lead to academic improvement. But I want to make it quite clear when I talk about parent participation that at the moment I'm talking about parental knowledge about the system, about the school and knowledge to help their sons and daughters. I think that's the only attainable participation, and when we talk about parental participation in curriculum areas, our experience in secondary schools in New South Wales is so limited, I don't think we could say except in a hypothetical way, whether it would improve student academic achievements at all. Who knows, we don't know—no school's done it.

Findings: Students

Of those 39 high school students who completed the written questionnaire, twenty-one were female and eighteen male, their ages ranging from 12 to 17, but with a slight majority in the 15-17 age group. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire during the course of the interview with their parents, if they were present at that time. Otherwise, a questionnaire and a stamped, addressed envelope was left with the parents with the request that their children would complete the questionnaire at their leisure and return it to the interviewer. Most responded. The majority of responses were of short sentence length, with a few students writing paragraphs of up to three sentences, and just as many giving one word answers.

Although the criteria for selecting target interviewee families was that they should have at least two students attending either of the schools undergoing the survey, all children of the families selected attending the high school were asked to answer the questionnaire. In some cases, there were no children of high school

age, the students having been selected from the primary school either having no elder siblings, or ones attending a different high school from the high school of the survey. In other cases there were as many as four children from the one family currently attending the high school, and this of course meant that it was not possible to hold the number of student respondents from the different language backgrounds in equal proportions.

Background

The final number of student respondents of each language background was as follows: nine Aboriginal/Koori (A/K), ten each of Greek (G) and of Arabic (A) speaking background, four each of Tongan (T) and of Vietnamese (V) speaking background and two of only English-speaking (E) background.

All of the students of Arabic speaking background and all but one of the students of Greek speaking background were born in Australia. One Vietnamese speaking background student had been in Australia for eleven years, one Greek speaking background student for ten, two more Vietnamese speaking background for nine years, one Tongan speaking background student for seven years, two more Tongan speaking background for three and one Tongan speaking background and one Vietnamese speaking background for two years only.

Personal Experience of Schooling

Most students directly linked 'learning' with getting a job and establishing a career.

So that they could learn and to get a good career. Cause you need to have an education to find a good job.(V)

To get educated by the teacher and to get a job to support there future family.(G)

To get an education for general knowledge and a chance to make a career.(A)

However, it was significant that only one Aboriginal/Koori student wrote of education as opening up career prospects. The majority of responses from this group were simply 'to be educated'. In contrast only a smaller number of students from the other groups of the sample simply responded that they had to go to school 'to learn', 'so that they could learn good stuff' or 'to get educated'

Two Greek speaking background students spoke of the socialising aspect of schooling, one mentioning that attending school enabled children to 'associate with people of all ages', the other that it helped them to 'Learn about the world around them, meet people and learn to get on with people'. One student, of only English speaking background, expressed a broader perspective.

Children go to school to learn the basics of life. If they don't go to school then there would be no sense of achievement or knowledge in the children's lives. School is the foundation of beginning a career in any field of work.

Friends, having fun and friendly teachers all ranked highly as the things liked best about school, with 'learning new things' also receiving quite a few mentions. Sport featured largely for the Aboriginal/Koori students as the one thing most liked about school, as did meeting with friends. One Aboriginal/Koori student appreciated also 'having a choice in what you want to do'.

I like best about school is when I see my friend to talk to them when I have a problem.(G)

I like my friends and I like my teachers. Ever since I left to high school I have made new friends, met new people and I also like my subjects, they are very interesting.(A)

I like best about school is when I understand what to do and when people come and ask me to play with them.(T)

Excellent teachers, good friends and lots of fun.(A)

The learning part i.e. actually being taught something of interest to.(V)

PE and Aboriginal studies because you don't always learn about your culture. (A/K)

The things most disliked about school included detention, overcrowding, fighting amongst the students, boring lessons or topics, some difficult subjects and, for some students, the teachers themselves. One Vietnamese speaking background student preferred teachers to be relatively strict,

[What I like least about school is] When the teachers are really easy going. And when a teacher writes a whole stack and you don't learn anything.

Other students criticised teachers for being too strict or for picking on students.

I don't like teachers giving us detention. I don't like kids fighting because I never do. Teachers picking on you. No teacher has ever picked on me but some of my friends tell me that teachers pick on them.(T)

At school I hate people who fight and the teachers who are strict.(A)

Detention, especially when its not your fault and the teacher blames on you.(G)

Some of the teachers (A/K)

One student of Greek speaking background liked school least 'When the teachers don't teach you good enough. Then we don't go good.' The two only English speaking background students were in agreement with him as far as relief teachers were concerned.

I also don't like it when the teacher is away and a replacement is sent to teach the class, but really does not have a clue about what to teach, this is wasting their time and ours.(E)

Aboriginal/Koori students tended to nominate certain subjects such as 'Geography and Science' as the things liked least about school, although one student wrote of 'meeting and making friends' as least liked. Another said they did not like 'Maths because they talk too much , another complained about the 'Life in the history' and still another about 'Homework'.

When asked which were their best and their worst subjects, it was sometimes unclear from the answers whether the students were choosing on the basis of enjoyment or of academic success. However, one Vietnamese speaking background student had earlier noted among the least likeable aspects of school 'Not doing very well in a particular subject'. Aboriginal/Koori students ranked Maths highly as best subject followed closely by Physical Education. Students on the whole preferred those subjects in which they felt rewarded by some measure of success. This was borne out by statements such as:

My best subject is Maths because I really have learnt a lot.(A)

I don't really have a worst subject but in Maths I'm not that good. I really try hard to improve my effort.(T)

Maths, PE, Home Science (A/K)

Aboriginal studies (A/K)

Some students listed a number of subjects as their best or their worst. Ten students listed English as among their best subjects, while only three listed it as among their worst. Maths was seen by fourteen students as their best subject, and by ten as their worst. Seven students nominated Science as best and eight as worst. Both History and Languages scored moderately badly, each being nominated by five students as their worst, one student going so far as to claim,

Definitely Languages, because of the teachers that teach it.(E)

Art and Geography featured highly for Aboriginal/Koori students, among those subjects that are the students worst.

Four Aboriginal/Koori students claimed that their parents helped them with their schoolwork. Only one student from the other groups could say of his parents helping him with his schoolwork 'They help me when I get stuck on a question or answer'(E), a large number of students claimed, as did one student of Greek speaking background 'They don't really '.

They ask me if I ever need help but usually they cannot.(G)

They never help me with my homework.(T)

I help myself with my schoolwork. They only look at my report cards.(A)

They don't I go to a homework centre after school (A/K)

Others talked of indirect support.

They don't help me with my English, they ask my brother to help so I don't mind.(G)

Encouraging me to study.(A)

The financial aspect was also noted.

My parents help by paying for my schoolbooks, uniform etc.(V)

I ask them for money to buy me books and pens for school. By letting me do my work in peace.(T)

Of the thirty nine students interviewed, twenty one spoke of completing Year 12, although only sixteen mentioned getting the HSC, and only thirteen of those fifteen spoke of attending university or of a choice of profession that would have entailed tertiary study. As one student who did not mention the HSC or further study said,

I would like to leave school at 17 to 18 years old, because school is funner than home.(A)

17 years but also to go to university (A/K)

Nine students wanted to leave school at sixteen and another three at fifteen and under, while one student answered 'I don't know'. While most students were relatively specific about the fields they were interested in (including one response 'Get a job at the airport'), fifteen of the students just wanted 'work' or to 'Find a job that I like'.

18 so I can get my HSC so I can get a good job (A/K)

16 because I want a job at sixteen (A/K)

Seven of the Aboriginal/Koori students questioned were specific about the work areas they were interested in. For example, 'Basketballer (famous)', Working for the government ', 'Work for the Aboriginal people', 'Lawyer or Marine Biology', 'Forklift driver'. One simply stated 'work' and another had written 'maybe go to uni' but then crossed it out and wrote 'I don't know'.

Only one student openly detested school, writing 'want to leave now because I hate school'(T). But two brothers of Arabic speaking background both felt that 'it's a waste of time to do years 11 and 12'. One of them had a preferred trade selected, but the other, when asked what he wanted to do on leaving school, answered 'what coming to me'. Two Aboriginal/Koori students gave no reason for their preferred school-leaving age, but four students were concerned about obtaining work.

16 because I want to (A/K)

Student Decision-making in Schooling

When asked about who made most of the decisions at school the responses from the students ranged from,

No-one in particular.(A)

through,

The teachers, the principal, majority of parents and some student bodies.(V)

to,

When I see the school counsellor she asks me what I want to be and all these questions. So really, I make my own decisions.(A)

The majority of students, however, saw the principal, the deputy principal and the teachers as the primary decision-makers. The principal was seen to be the sole decision-maker eight times, the deputy once and the teachers, six times. The principal amongst others was nominated as a decision-maker twelve times, the deputy and others five times and teachers and others fifteen times. Parents and students were included as participants in decision-making in the school on three occasions only, and on all three occasions, together.

When asked what decisions they, as students, could make at their school, eleven students felt that there were no decisions that they could make, only one made a slight concession and another a more definite response.

We can't make no decisions, only when our teacher is away and for sport only.(G)

Any decision as well as tell the prefects and if the principle agrees with it, it can go on. (A/K)

Others mentioned choice of subjects and sport activities, and two the decision to apply herself.

The type of subjects I want to study. The sport I want to do.(V)

Excursions. Subjects at school.(V)

What I want to learn and what others want to learn and how do I go about doing what I want to do.(A)

Whether or not I want to work (A/K)

Put on shows (A/K)

As a student my decisions are to learn.(T)

Several others took the opportunity to suggest 'more free periods' and 'more camps', while yet another spoke of the pecking-order within the student group.

I can make decisions in the class, but outside the classroom, it's impossible because the kids bigger than me think they can boss me around and it's very hard.(A)

Three students mentioned the official channel of the student council group.

If we would like something to be done by the school then we approach a student representative who then brings up the topic at the next meeting they have.(E)

We've got a student council group but the teachers stick up for us the principal won't listen much.(G)

Well lots (of decisions) but we have to have perimitation from the school council.(G)

One added.

No I can't male decisions but would like to (A/K)

When asked what decisions they would like to make, while several students wanted to make decisions on 'nothing' or 'nil' and one on 'anything', there were others who opted for 'what we learn' and 'the things we can do in class'. In general students were more forthcoming with this question particularly the Aboriginal/Koori students.

On what we should be teached so that the teacher knows what the students are interested in (A/K)

New deputy because he is prejudiced and more rights for students (A/K)

So students can learn better (A/K)

Have rights in school (A/K)

Yes would like to say how to make things (A/K)

The teachers I want to teach me in my chosen subject.(V)

On our timetable for exams. On getting maybe once a week a free period for Revision of the weeks work. Just things to do with us and our work.(G)

Other important issues included freedom/discipline, uniforms and school facilities.

Whether to attend classes or not.(G)

Leave class whenever.(A)

What children wear and what happens to children who muck up.(E)

No uniform because most of the students don't wear them.(G)

No uniform, help the kids.(G)

To change the uniform (A/K)

To make decisions as to how to change our school e.g. toilets.(A)

Make the principal put new toilets in the boys toilets.(G)

More trips (A/K)

Parent Decision Making and Involvement in Schooling

When asked what decisions their parents made about their school, nine students stated that their parents didn't make any decisions with regard to the school, two said they did not know what decisions their parents could make about school, four wrote of some measure of parental decision making while others stated that their parents had decided on 'the school I go to' and 'what we are taught'. Many spoke of exhortations to study hard and to behave well.

Sometimes they tell us what subjects to choose but mainly they let us do what we feel is right. Though they do want us to do Yr11 and Yr12.(G)

The decisions they make is that when you enter the school 'there are dirty kids, do behave good, son' those kind of remarks.(A)

They told me to do what the teacher told us to do and work hard.(T)

Have to go to year 12 and uni also study a lot (A/K)

They make sure we get a good education (A/K)

Others spoke of more specific issues.

My parents decide if we should wear uniform or if corporal punishment should be introduced at our school.(E)

Whether I could go to the excursion or not.(A)

Probably tell the teachers to be strict about uniforms and our subjects.(G)

They think if the son or their daughter is bad behave they should keep them in during their free time.(A)

The only decisions they make is when the school sends letters.(G)

When the students were asked what kind of decisions they thought their parents would like to be able to make they gave very similar, in some cases, identical answers to the question of how they actually already participated. Different answers included,

They would probably want to make decisions regarding the type of subjects offered.(V)

The hiring of staff. (A/K)

On whats teached and know how their children is coping in school.
(A/K)

Be good in life and don't end up like they did without a chance. (A/K)

Right decisions so we get a good education. (A/K)

Students to wear proper uniform and go to school instead of jigging.(T)

On what an appropriate punishment would be for truence and jiggers. Kids that are caught smoking etc. Of course only if it was their kids.(G)

Make the teachers dress appropriately or make them school uniform as well.(G)

When asked whether they thought their parents had enough chance to get involved with the school, thirteen of the students said yes, one said 'yes but don't

do anything' and fourteen said no, two students didn't answer and five answered that they didn't know. All those who answered in the affirmative referred to 'parent teacher meetings', 'meetings at night' or 'interviews with teachers'. Those who answered in the negative had more varied reasons.

No, I dance think so because they do hell meetings but the thing is they don't ring our parents up they give us notes to take home. And half the kids don't give the notes their parents. Because half of our parents work and can't make it anyway, that's what the students think so they just don't bother.(G)

No, I think my parents hardly get involved because of too much work commitments and they never get time to visit the school.(A)

Not really because most of the meetings are held before my dad comes from work.(A)

No because the school doesn't directly ask them to get involved. (A/K)

No more family open days. (A/K)

No only when teacher sends a letter. (A/K)

No because they hardly get told to get involved.(G)

No, my parents are very busy working. Their only communication is the school reports and notices.(V)

No because they don't really know how to speak in English.(T)

I feel they don't, mainly because if they do attend meetings, what they say is taken for granted.(E)

When the students were asked whether they felt that their parents should be more, or less involved in the school, and why they thought so, there was one blank response, one 'I don't mind', one 'It's up to them', one 'I think they are just right for me', one wrote, 'nil', one stated 'less they don't get a say' another 'none of business, and two 'I don't know', twenty- eight students however, felt that their parents should be more involved. Eighteen of these twenty-two students expressed, in one way or another their wish for their parents to 'know' or 'understand' more about 'what's going on' at school.

More, so they know what kind of Education their children have.(V)

More to see how the child or children are going at school (A/K)

More because the kids think they can get away with everything. (A/K)

Yes because of some teachers (A/K)

I think they should be more involved because only teachers make the decisions.(G)

More involved in important issues concerning education because they have a right to know what their children are being taught.(A)

To do something like change rules like stricker.(A)

I think they should be more involved in my school to see what is going on with me, whether I'm bad or I'm good. But still, I think I'm good in my opinion.(A)

I think more because whatever the school told them what to do they do it without knowing what they are talking about.(T)

Yes they have to learn much as they can. Not to help us but to help them.(V)

Yes they should be involved so they know what students do at school.(G)

Only two students thought their parents should be less involved with the school.

Less involved because they make me feel embarrassed.(E)

Less involved because it's the teachers' decisions to teach the students.(T)

Two expressed it as a responsibility of parenthood.

More becauser their my mother and father. (A/K)

More because their children are going to the school. (A/K)

Responsibility for Schooling

When asked who should decide what the school should spend its money on, seven students thought the whole school community should decide—principals, teachers, students and parents together. Six students thought that the parents should decide, nine felt that the decision should be left to them as students, two to the teachers and students together, four to the principal alone, one to the teachers and the principal, three to the teachers alone, and one student suggested that the government should decide and two more that the students should. Other students suggested how the money should be spent, rather than nominating the bursars—it should be spent on ‘art things and books’, ‘broken windows and sporting equipment’.

I think the parents should decide who spends the money for the school because my school fees are too much.(A)

I think the students should because they are the ones that are learning inside the school.(A)

Teachers and parents. Teachers know what students need.(A)

Yes they mostly spend it on sport equipment but it would be better on excursions. (A/K)

On more trips and students. (A/K)

When asked who should decide what they were taught, fourteen of the students suggested that teachers alone should have that responsibility, seven the students alone, three the principal and one the parents. While two suggested the government and another didn’t know, nine students suggested teacher and student or teacher and parent or other collaborative arrangements.

The teachers because they know more about subjects than we do.(A)

The government should decide what students are taught in class.(A)

The head of education. (A/K)

Staff because they should organise with children but not so much. (A/K)

Teachers and parents together should decide.(G)

Teachers should get together to decide that. They should ask students of senior class, sometimes, for a feedback.(V)

Parents, teachers and people who have experience in education but I think the students should have a say in what they want to know.(A)

I think student should be given a say, on say what they'd rather do, advertising or poetry.(G)

One student was more concerned, however, with teaching method.

They should show us how to do the question and not hard ones.(G)

When the students were asked to state who they thought was responsible for a student's doing well or poorly at school, sixteen thought that the student alone was responsible, eight the teachers alone, three the principal and two the parents. The others saw the responsibility as shared, to varying degrees, between the principal, the teachers, the parents and the student.

The teacher but the princable should take the blame because she should check up.(A)

Teachers don't teach me much. (A/K)

The students are. (A/K)

Yourself. (A/K)

Us self because we must do it for it's own good.(V)

The parents to make sure they do their homework. And the teachers to make sure they work hard in class.(A)

The teacher or the parent. They should be interested in what their child is doing. The teacher should advise the parent if the child is going badly in school.(A)

The student, naturally, although there are circumstances where the students are restricted to do just enough because of work or their surroundings etc.(V)

The teacher and his parents and how they treat the person.(G)

I think it's the student's responsible because it's up to them. If they want to learn they will. If they make about its their problem.(G)

Teachers because most of them at our school do not explain the work.(G)

One only English speaking background student and one Aboriginal/Koori student saw 'two aspects' to the question. On the one hand the student was responsible for their work, but on the other hand, the teacher was responsible in that,

Most teachers pick students who they like and give them good marks. They also pick out the students they hate and no matter how much that student tries, the teacher will give that student a bad mark. (E)

The student for one but also maybe people such as staff and parents not being interested in what they do or how well they do. (A/K)

Findings: Parents

Backgrounds

Thirty six families were interviewed in all, by a series of home visits. At times, only one parent was present to be interviewed, but approximately one-third of the interviews involved both parents. In a few instances the interview was with a guardian or a close relative who had assumed a parenting role.

Eight Aboriginal/Koori families were interviewed, through seven home visits and one work visit. In only one of the families did the father also participate in the interview. Of the families spoken to, two had been residing in the area for less than eighteen months, one family for four and a half years, two families for approximately eight years, one family for thirteen years and another two families for twenty years. Two of the interviewees claimed eight years of schooling, four claimed nine and the final two, ten years of schooling in the Australian educational system.

Of the six Greek-speaking background families that were interviewed, one parent had arrived in Australia as early as 1963, and one as late as 1976, although the majority had arrived in the late sixties and early seventies. One parent had had seven years of schooling in Greece, and all the others had had six.

Of the six Arabic-speaking background families that were interviewed, one parent had arrived in Australia as early as 1968 and one as late as 1977 but the others all arrived in the early seventies. One parent had had no schooling at all and one had had eight years of schooling, although the average number of years of schooling for the majority was six.

Of the six Vietnamese-speaking background families that were interviewed, one parent had arrived in Australia as early as 1978 and one as recently as 1988, two in 1980, one in 1984 and another in 1987. Three of these parents had had twelve years of schooling, one having completed university, one had had eight years of schooling, one ten years and the other eleven.

Of the four Tongan speaking background families that were interviewed, one parent had arrived in Australia as early as 1968 and one as recently as 1986, one parent in 1976 and one in 1981. Although one parent had had eight years of schooling in Tonga, one year in New Zealand and three years in Australia, the others had had six years or less in Tonga only. At least two of the families had spent some time in New Zealand before coming to Australia.

Of the six English-speaking background families that were interviewed, one parent had arrived in Australia from Germany in 1950 and another from France in 1952. Both these parents had gone on to school in Australia and in neither of their households did they speak their native language with their children. Three of the parents had had nine years of schooling in Australia, and one of them had had twelve, the others' years of schooling ranged from ten to eleven years.

Aboriginal/Koori Parents

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in Meeting Aspirations

When asked what they wanted from their children's schooling, only two of the parents failed to mention the HSC as a goal, but it was apparent that for the majority of Aboriginal/Koori parents, employment was the chief concern and that attaining the HSC equated with better job opportunities.

I'd like them to get their HSC and good jobs, good positions—but it depends on them. Self-esteem and confidence come from within the home. Children should be allowed to work at their own level, parents shouldn't put pressure on. But it's the same for boys and girls—I don't expect more from either sons or daughters (although maybe more from the daughters).

I want them to get a good job, ultimately. It depends on what they want, how far they'll have to go. My daughter wants to be a nurse, but I'm hoping she'll change her mind. It's not my own choice—you have to be a special person to be a nurse.

My children went to _____ pre-school and it was okay. I'd like them to get their HSC eventually. The school could have more on computers.

I want them to have a good education so that they can deal with the future—they've got to survive. It's no good teaching children what they taught us at school. The HSC doesn't apply to every child, because they're not all the same.

I want her to get the basic skills, of course, but also as much schooling as she can. I'd like her to go right through to the HSC and uni or college, if she wants to.

It's really up to them, if they want to go on to year 11 and 12, and get the HSC. It's best to encourage them a lot—half and half. Show them the example of Aboriginals who've got the HSC—they're earning good money. You've got to try for what you want—cars and things. They should be able to get employment.

These three, they've got to go all the way through school, we'll be happy. But you mustn't push them, because they'll slack off. The eldest wanted to finish at year 10. We said no, but if we push her, she'll want to leave school. By a certain age, say 16, they get it into their head that they're their own boss. We expect them to get the basic 3Rs—the more education they get the better. Although kids can be over-educated and not get employment. I want them to get employment.

I want them to finish year 12 and get their HSC. I reckon they should learn to get into a job as soon as they leave school.

The families were evenly divided on whether the schools were doing what they wanted for their children. Two mothers spoke of their children being subject to too many changes of teachers to make the progress they should, but one was referring to the high school, and the other to the primary school.

Another parent spoke of her child's improvement upon leaving the school in this study.

I haven't had much feed-back. Haven't received anything from the school, really I'm happy with their progress—except for a few subjects (English, Maths and Geography) which are needed for the HSC. One of my daughters has had four different teachers in Maths and three in Geography this year already.

My daughter is slack on reading, but it's because she's had six different teachers in kindy —the whole class has the same problems. She's being tutored now. The teachers know the problem. Not one of the kids got settled in the first couple of years.

My child has improved 100% since leaving _____ and attending a school where there's a minority of Aboriginal children. It does make a difference when there's a large group of Aboriginal children.

Not _____ , not at the moment—there's a bit of bickering down there between the Aboriginal girls and the teachers. One teacher down there says terrible things and the girls get upset. The teachers don't have enough time for the young Aboriginal girls down there—that's why a lot of them are leaving school.

One parent spoke of a specific service extended to her child through the high school, whereas other parents were more general in their appraisal.

I'm happy with ____ . My son goes to a speech therapist there. He has trouble with stuttering, so they got the therapist in for him. I'm very happy with his work there.

We're happy with what ____ is doing. The school provides a lot and the kids don't complain. But they should have more videos on employment. The Post Office offers a variety of things and you could end up highly placed there. Our kids need to know how Kooris can find work.

I'm happy with what the school is doing. Everything seems to be alright up there for them.

I'm happy with the school. The boys enjoy the sports and join in.

When questioned about the parental role in student achievement, five of the eight families interviewed spoke of the importance of homework.

The parents should get more involved with the school through meetings and going up to the school. The children don't have enough homework from the school. I used to do my homework in front of TV, at the kitchen table. My daughter has spelling tests on Fridays. I tell her to go into her room and write it out and then I test her, but she still has problems writing out sentences. When my son brings homework home, there aren't any problems. I go and ask the teachers about them, and walk in any time. I told my daughter 'if you don't pick up, no more sport'. The teachers said they wondered what had happened, she was doing so much better.

They don't get much homework, but I make sure they do it.

I help her with her homework, when she comes home—every Monday she gets homework.

We help them when they need help with their homework and encourage them to study. Encouragement is the most important thing.

I make sure they do their homework—although I haven't seen him with any. Children should have a couple of hours of homework every night. We coach him in sports.

Others spoke of tutoring and stressed again the need for encouragement and parental involvement with the school.

Get involved with the school and go to school meetings. We used to have a show day for parents to see what the students had done over the year—I don't know if they do that down here. They don't get enough homework. There are tutoring classes down here on a one to one basis in the afternoon with students from the university. They go four days a week and finish off stuff that's been left over from school. He's improved a lot. The teacher has 28 in a class and can't spare the time. But on the one to one basis, they can understand what they've done in school that day.

You've got to always encourage them, and not put pressure on them, because they'll all back off, go in the other direction, if you do. Most kids are the same. I approve of homework and have even thought of tutoring to help them.

You have to give them support and encouragement and you have to encourage determination in your kids. If your daughter wants to be a hairdresser, then you've got to encourage her to do it, say she can if she wants to, it's up to her to succeed. You mustn't let them think that they'll go out and fail, because then they won't bother. I don't understand a lot of their schoolwork—it's all new to me—they have to help each other.

Parent's Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's School Experience

Only two of the parents interviewed attended schools in the city. The others spoke of country schools they attended and while some had enjoyed the experience, others talked of the prejudice and discrimination they had encountered.

I went to _____, but didn't have the chance that they get today. If I could, I would go back, I suppose. We didn't have music, activities, excursions. The teachers were harder—teachers these days are sort of soft. We were made to go all the way home, change, and go back if our uniform wasn't right—it had to be a certain number of inches below the knee. Today they can get away with all that. I was a foster child and my parents weren't involved with the school, they were quite old.

I enjoyed school, especially sports, although I didn't like the maths teacher.

It was terrible—well, it was alright—but we were a large family—there were 12 kids—and my parents couldn't afford to keep us on at school. I had to leave at 14, but I enjoyed it, and was quite good. The teachers were quite strict, and homework was given out, but my parents were not that involved—we lived a long way away. It was a country school, better than the city. I remember 1st year at primary school being the worst—there was no pre-school—but after that it was fine.

I knew I had to go to school—it was a country school in _____, but in the high school, one teacher in science turned me right off it. The teachers were more strict then. My aunt and one of my grandparents were involved with the school. They used to teach at the pre-school up at the mission.

I enjoyed school—the teachers in those days had time for you. I went to a large country school and had no problems. A lot of kids on the reserve didn't always go through to high school, but I did to third year.

We went to a school in the country and loved it. We had a school uniform and there was a lot more discipline. I was sometimes frightened of the principal, but they were good teachers.

I went to _____ and _____. I liked the first school but they were very prejudiced at the second school. The teaching was alright, but the attitude of the teachers wasn't.

I didn't like it. There was too much discrimination back in those days and it was very strict. The school teacher would say 'I don't know why you blacks come here. You can't learn anything we give you'.

Although one mother had attended the same primary school her young sons were now attending, she was 'not sure if things had changed'. Other parents felt that their children had greater freedom of choice than they had had, but were less disciplined as well.

They appear to enjoy it—at least three of them did. A couple of the middle kids left at year 10—I didn't push them to stay on. One has gone on to uni and another to ____ . It's different from my own days. English and Maths have changed. Many of the subjects now have changed, and there's less discipline now. I've observed this at the school. I haven't actually been in a classroom, but I've seen kids in the playground and heard stories (whether they're true or not). We always showed respect to teachers because they were teachers and because they were older, and so we had their respect back. There's not that respect between students and teachers today, the times are different, things have changed too much.

It's very different—she enjoys it. It seems to be easier for them now. We never got what they get in lessons and to help with lessons.

They have more advantages now, extras. We just had the main things. There's more freedom in the classroom, the children are more relaxed. We were too frightened to say we wanted to go to the toilet.

It's not as disciplined. One day when I went up there, there was fighting in class. The classes are too full, year 5 in with year 6 and year 2 in with year 3. Teachers used to be a lot older and they used to look more authoritative, wearing ties and suits. They're a lot younger now and dress in jeans, casually. Students are on a first name basis with their teachers now.

Teachers were more strict when I was at school. He enjoys school—they have a lot more things than we did—they have a lot more choice.

One parent found fault with a teacher's preferential treatment of students, while another chose to speak of the Aboriginal/Koori experience.

Well, going by incident, my eldest daughter was in the English masters class, but the teacher was gay and preferred the male students, and there was pressure from the other Aboriginal students, so she gave up on her studies. All Koori children drop out of ____ .

It's much less disciplined—there are too many different things around. People need to learn about the Aborigines, and the Aborigines need to learn about themselves. So many people were taken away from their people. There's three sorts of Aborigine. There's the mission breed—they're different, then there's the searchers who are more or less searching for their lost identity and there's the pretenders—a lot of people who tried to be identified as Aboriginal, but they're not, they just wanted the money.

Responses to the question 'how do your children learn best' varied greatly, some parents citing the subjects their children liked most, others talking of the encouragement they as parents must give and one parent raising the issue of homework again.

The one who's at ____ would sit down and discuss what he wanted and about setting goals and achieving them. He tried different jobs, but liked being outdoors, and so he chose to become a Park Ranger. So the child has to make their own decisions, but then they need the parent's encouragement and support. If they're doing well, you give them a pat on the back. If they're trying hard, but not doing so well, still give them a pat on the back. I went back and did my own nursing course after rearing children. I'd been out of school 15 years. It was difficult, but the children encouraged me to go on. That's why determination is important.

It's best to write things out, over and over. I learnt this when I first went to Technical college. Teachers need to ask if the students understand what's written on the board and the students need to ask the teacher if they don't understand. I teach my own kids 'if you want something, you go and ask'.

They mainly talk about the reading games they do.

My eldest says it depends on the teacher—if he had time for you, you'd have time for learning.

She's doing very well in reading and arithmetic and would like to learn the computer.

They like writing stories and reading and maths. We travel on the road and say 'what's twice 12, take away 11 and add 3' and he gets it straight away. We brought the children down here so that they could adapt to country and to city life. There wasn't much competition up there, or different communities, but there were good Koori sports people.

One son learns by listening to music as he studies. They've learned a lot with the one to one tutoring.

When he was at his first school, he had homework every day. But I haven't seen him with any since he started at ____ .

Current Parent Involvement in Schooling

While two parents stated that they were content with their current amount of involvement with their children's school, two others felt that they would like more involvement.

I have to go and meet his speech therapist on Thursday. I've only been up there to enrol him. I would like to be more involved with the school, when we get settled in our new home.

They have sports and Aboriginal week. I've been to one meeting, but I work during the day. I'm happy with the way things are—I can't be more involved.

Just parent/teacher days and there was a year 10 dinner to encourage students to continue on. I was on the interviewing panel for the Aboriginal assistant. We're happy with our amount of involvement at present.

Nothing, really—except there's the Aboriginal dinner tomorrow night. My daughter received a sports award last year. There was also a year 10 farewell, when we talked my daughter into going back and getting her school certificate. Letters were sent out for a parent/teacher night, but I couldn't go, I was away. I haven't had any contact from teachers. I'd like to be more involved, because my own parents weren't, and I feel that it's important for parents to be there.

Others spoke of work and child-minding commitments which prohibited their involvement.

I have two babies and can't find the time to get up to the school unless I take the kids. If they had babysitters up at the school, I'd be there all the time. If I go anywhere, I pay my eldest daughter to babysit—but you can't do that all the time.

I'm working, so I don't have the time, but I've been up for reports and the parent/teacher nights.

One parent talked of the problems in achieving parental involvement and another of the concern shown by a teacher for her daughter.

I've been to all the Koori meetings, the committees and stuff, but it's the same parents all the time, mostly because of the others' attitudes to schooling and to their shyness. And the same ones take the floor all the time. But if something important comes up, you've got to try and catch them when they take the kids up. It's the ones that come in from the suburbs you see most, the ones that live nearby let the kids walk up.

I was sick when the youngest was in primary school, but I've been up to the high school, talking to the teachers. I was always at the school. One teacher saw my daughter's potential and always involved her and was upset when she dropped out.

Only one mother felt that she was not really part of the community of her children's school, but two parents spoke of the need to resolve or at least accept differences that arose.

Not really—although I know a few of the mothers of other students, I don't see much of them. I'm happy enough to go up to the school. We had to move out of the country and into the city to get jobs. I work, so I don't have the time now, as I've taken another position, but I try to make time. I would love to be more involved, because it's for the child's future.

We have our differences, but I always go back, don't bear a grudge on it. I know other parents with children at the school. I haven't had to go up very often. Most of the things that go on down there are all done by the girls—and then you don't hear of it any more.

It doesn't bother us to go up to the school—we feel really comfortable. We go down there, *if there are problems*, and sit down and sort things out. I like to walk away with a clear conscience, otherwise it could retaliate on the child. Have a cup of tea and all that. We know other parents with children at the school.

They made me feel comfortable—they're very nice people. I met his teacher when I enrolled him, and I know other parents with children at the school.

Yes, it's fine. I know all the teachers and the principal. It's a good mob of teachers. We had a Koori on the interview panel for the principal and we fill the principal in on what's what for understanding of the Koori community and all the other ethnic groups. It was the Redfern play about kids from all different nationalities going bushwalking that was put on video.

Yes, I know other parents, and the teacher and my daughter's friends.

Yes, I'd go up to the school and talk to the teachers, but the children won't do it if they don't want to, and it's no good pushing.

Yes, the teachers have changed, but the receptionist is the same.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

Two parents knew of the proposed school councils, and one knew of a school that was already implementing the system, and although some difficulties were foreseen, the majority of the interviewees expressed enthusiasm for such an innovation.

I've heard a bit about it. It's worth trying, although there could be problems with qualifications. The department should know about it. You need parents and business people who know about qualifications. The principals would have the best ideas, and it would come back to them, although you'd have to have majority rules and the principal could be overruled. I want a school uniform, because I can't afford for them to wear different clothes every day. I make my own kids wear them. I say 'you'll have to wear them in high school'.

I'd heard about it from the school. It's a good idea—but if you're going to make a decision, and the other people don't like the idea ... so you should have a meeting with the community first. The principal should come down here into the community and talk to the parents. The teachers have got to come and find out where the Aboriginal students are coming from, their environment. The media has got it all blown out of proportion. We've tried for a lot of the parents to come along, sent out letters and things, but there seems to be a don't-care attitude. Some aren't really interested in the future for their children. If the parents are involved, then the kids have got a good model.

_____'s doing exactly the same thing. They had a survey and asked parents what the kids needed and how to spend the money. But it depends on who you get. You could get a fair person or someone one-sided. Not many parents would have the time to be involved.

I haven't heard about it, but it would be alright if they know what they really want for the school, with a bit of everyone there. We'll have to wait and see how it works out.

No, I didn't know about that. But even if you could get a Koori onto a committee, they'd need support from the rest of the committee, because you can be overruled by others. And they'd just give up, because they'd feel they weren't getting anywhere, so why bother being there. Everything would be in jargon anyway, and they wouldn't understand. I didn't even want to look at this questionnaire because of the jargon.

No, I haven't heard about it, but it wouldn't make much difference as far as the teachers and students were concerned. It would depend on which parents got involved.

I didn't know about this, but I think it's a good idea—I think it would work. The other parents don't go up to the school, so it will be difficult to get them on the council.

I hadn't heard about it, but I think it's an excellent idea, because the kids and the teachers are the ones that know what's going on. It's good to have it all out front. Most parents would be working, so you'd have to select the ones that aren't workers. I know some parents who'd probably take it on.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers

All the interviewees felt that parents should have some say in how the school was run, particularly when it came to school funds. Two of the parents saw curriculum as being the domain of the teacher, and two more stressed the need for 'the basics'.

We should have a say (in school management). _____ needs a bus for the school to take the kids on sports days. Kids I've never seen before from the school come up and ask me to take them to things in other suburbs. It's ridiculous. They've got to find their own way there and back. We used to have a special bus, but they don't do it here. Curriculum is the teacher's job, that's what they're getting paid for.

As far as the money goes, parents should be involved in school management, but parents don't always know what's good to be taught in a classroom. It's different at home. The school's supposed to be teaching the kids to be self-supporting and to enter the workforce. It's really up to the teachers—it's what their job is supposed to be.

With all the Koori money, we are (participating in school management). That's where the P&C comes in—but I don't go to them, because of when they're held. I should go, but they seem to have the same people all the time. It's very hard to change things. A friend of mine had a run-in with the president. I'm sick of being pointed out as the one that stirs up trouble, but you have to if you want to change things. I get a bit tired of it after a while, I'd like others to go in and have a go. Parents should have a say (in the curriculum), but you must know how to read and write, or you can't do anything. My own kids seem to like maths, they catch on to it and can do it. I want to go back and do maths myself. You need the basics first, then you can go on and change.

Parents should have a lot of say in how the school spends its money. With the DSP, the Koori parents didn't know what their money was being spent on, so it was suggested there should be a Koori sub-committee to know that the kids were receiving the benefit. The school should approach the committee to take advice on spending money. It probably should be the same for all ethnic groups—because they know what their children want. Parents should have a say, they should be able to input on subjects the school provides. Children need the basics, the main subjects. I wouldn't push Other Approved Studies—they can always do these later or through TAFE. The timetabling means that there's much less choice than appears.

Parents should have a say in how the school is run and what is taught in the school.

If I don't like my kid learning something, I'll say so. If the child doesn't like something, it's no good to push it onto him. We should have a say in how the money's being spent, what it's for. We should have a look at any new principal's background, to see whether they've got a record of prejudice. Up in the country, a teacher once accused a child of stealing tennis racquets. We went up three weeks after to talk to the principal, and asked for the teacher to apologise. When he apologised, all the tension that had built up, went. That teacher can't do enough for the Koori now.

Parents should be able to make decisions on school management and on what the school teaches. I'm happy to make decisions, but I work 9 to 5, so time doesn't permit. If it was every day, I couldn't do it.

Parents should participate (in school management), it's a good idea, but I can't see them getting up to the school. I think they should have a say in what children are taught.

When it came to the question of student participation in school management and curriculum, parents were divided on how much responsibility could be given to students, although the majority felt that the older students, from year 10 onwards, should be 'given a say'. Only two of the parents felt that curriculum was the domain of the teachers, although it was evident that they expected the students to have their choice of the subjects offered.

Children should have a say in how the school spends its money. It would have to be a majority vote, because all students would have different ideas. There's no student council at _____. I can't really see the school listening, but they should. It's our kids future, they know their needs, especially at high school age. But the school should decide what's to be taught. They're the experts, the professionals, they've been there, done that, and our kids have got to get there. But children should still have a choice from what's offered. I always talk through with the children 'what shall I take', but the decision still rests with them. It's a very difficult thing for Kooris to find employment—not many people realise how hard it is. My mother was a welfare child. She'd been taken away from her own family, and never knew who they were, not even when she died.

They couldn't do much in primary, but high school kids could have more say. They're to be young men and women and need to be given responsibility. The kids at Tech. have no idea how the world goes. I think that children

should go up to the high school in sixth grade, in order to get used to it. But students shouldn't participate in school curriculum, although in history they could. The history of this country needs changing a lot. The real history needs to be told.

I don't know, I've only got two young ones. It would be more for the high school students—the little ones would only want more free time. The ones in high school could.

Year 11 and 12 (could have a say in how the school is run), they're a bit older, a bit more mature. They're the ones that have to put up with it and live by the rules, they should have a 50% say. The younger ones look up to the older ones. But the students wouldn't always know what's good, or best, to learn in the classroom. The teachers get upgraded in their education so that they're ahead of the students.

They should—even in primary school, some children would tell you what they want to do, sport and stuff.

There could be a lot of problems, if children have their say. There'll always be a clash. If one Aboriginal child says 'the teacher doesn't like me' it could cause friction. So it's really up to the parent to work out with the child to find out how differently the teacher treats the different children. A child could be mucking up, and the parent wouldn't know. He could be a totally different child with a big group of children at school. But children should be able to say what they like to learn, and what they'd benefit from.

You'd get all your hassles there—oh jees. We know what kids want today. If they could compromise with the parents and the school on how to spend the money—I don't know. But they can pick their subjects at school. My eldest daughter's interested in mechanics, and knows a garage that'll take her on—but if it's in school hours, it's called work experience, isn't it? We know the schools couldn't bring in a lot of extra subjects. They wouldn't have the teachers or the material.

No, just the parents and the teachers (should have input into school management and curriculum), although from year 10 up they'd be more mature and could have a say.

While three parents spoke of the need for the teacher's need not to 'give up' and to be sure that the student understood, others saw it as a two-way process, although two parents thought that a student's progress was ultimately up to the student, when it came to scholastic achievement.

The teacher has a lot of effect. When the child is doing well, the teacher should give them a pat on the back, but if they're not doing well the next day, and the teacher doesn't encourage them They've got to be encouraged, to give them confidence and self-esteem. Kids aren't all perfect. If a teacher gives up on a child when they don't understand, then that child will fail.

If a child gets on with a teacher, they do better, but the teacher has to do something, too. My eldest wasn't doing well with his first teacher, but he's back into it, now. He likes his new teacher.

If the teacher fails to get across then that kid's going nowhere. If the student likes the teacher and vice versa, it will always show. It all boils down to the teacher/student relationship—if the children don't understand, they've got to be able to ask.

Some of the time it's the teacher. If the child doesn't like the teacher or the way they teach, then that's it from day one. If enough people complain, then the teacher can be got rid of. If a whole class complains, there's got to be something done. If a student really likes the teacher, then they do well, but if the student doesn't like the subject or school, then they won't do well either—so it's up to the student as well.

It depends on the child and the teacher really. But if I had a teacher I didn't like, I'd still do my best because you are there to learn. It's all really based down on what education you get out of the school.

You'd have to look at it both ways—it's the child and the teacher. But a child could be stubborn and not want to listen.

If the child's got their mind set on their education, they'll do well. It's not like it was at ____ now.

I blame the child if he does badly. The teacher is not responsible if the child doesn't take notice or listen the way they're supposed to listen. But if the teacher takes a dislike to a child, then the child won't do well.

Responsibility for Schooling

While one parent felt that the principal had the main responsibility for her children's schooling, a second nominated the parents and the teachers, and a third suggested all three parties. Other parents elaborated upon the question.

The teachers, they know what to do.

It should involve the lot—teachers, principal and parents—and the government should pay for it.

They all play their parts—the teacher, the parents and the child, the government as well—fairly equally. The parents in the home have to be understanding of the child, they should know their children's different talents and abilities. The teacher at school, the government with money.

The principal is only there to supervise—it all rests on the teacher. If one child is having a problem, the teacher needs to sit down and sort it out, not push the child away. But it also depends on the kid—if they're not willing to learn. The only way to discipline them is to stop them from what they really like doing—you can't go on hitting them.

Myself, then the principal would be the first person to see. When a woman in the canteen called my son a liar, I went to the principal.

Establishment of Separate Schools for the Koori Community

Only two of the parents were in favour of the establishment of a separately run school for Aboriginal/Koori students. Two more spoke of wanting to see how it was

run before sending their children there. The majority, however, saw it as a backward step and something which they had to fight against.

It's an excellent idea. It'll give the Aboriginal kids real advantages—there'll be no difference between the kids and the teachers, then.

I've already enrolled them in the school. The Aboriginal people are getting a lot of advantages now—they're not getting enough—but a lot wait around to get things handed to them on a plate.

I'd like to see how it is, first, how it's run.

I didn't send my kids to the Aboriginal pre-school—I didn't think it good enough. Their father didn't get on with those people who're running it, so I thought I'd stay out of trouble. It's not run the right way for me anyway. I chose a day nursery and had no problems. Harry only learnt the difference between black and white when he went to kindy—'oh, I'm Aboriginal'. He didn't learn it at day nursery. I'm not in favour of a separate high school. It's the same set of people who run the pre-school, and they've got an ad hoc, come and go attitude. I'd need to know that it was running better. I also think it would be better mixed. It's supposed to be open to non-Aboriginal, but it will be selective. And all the Aboriginal teachers are cooped up in the AECC. They're not in the classrooms, haven't come to the schools.

I won't send my daughter there, she wouldn't learn anything. When they all get together, that's it.

It's just going backwards. I went to an Aboriginal school when I started for a couple of months, before I went to the white school. We Aboriginals fought to go to the white school. I'm not going to send my kids to an Aboriginal school.

I won't be sending my kids to an all Aborigine school—it'll be like America—a second-hand education. We fought to get out of the mission schools. It's a backward step. The government won't support it. My kids go to a multicultural school. The boy was captain last year. He is mates with all nationalities. It's good to mix with everyone—all on the same level.

No, it's a step backwards. As kids we fought to get into white school in the first place. My daughter wouldn't study, or get her work done with a big group of Aborigines—she'd be distracted.

Parents of Greek Speaking Background

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in Meeting Aspirations

When the parents were questioned about what they wanted for children to gain from going to school, only two parents actually mentioned that they wanted their children to complete the HSC, however, it was apparent that this was a goal for the majority.

The subjects that they learn are the most important, the basic skills. Our second eldest son is doing his work experience in carpentry, if he likes it, he may leave school and get an apprenticeship, but it's up to him. The others are too young to think of what they'll do yet.

Our eldest wanted to be a doctor, but he didn't get enough points, so now he's doing accountancy at college and law part-time. Our daughter wants to be a teacher but our second son is going to wait and see how his marks go before he decides.

We want them to be educated to a higher degree, a better standard than ourselves. If the children are willing and they have the ability, they could go on to university or technical college, anything, so long as it's more than we have.

I want the best that is possible for them. We'll take it step by step, but if they have the ability to go ahead, I'd like them to get the HSC and then go on to whatever they want.

First of all, we want them to be good citizens. Secondly, we'd like them to realise the full extent of their talent, and because they were born here, we'd like them to be good Australians. They are young yet, but we are encouraging them towards the HSC and higher educational qualifications.

We expect a lot for our children. If they can't get an academic qualification, then at least they should get a trade, but they must learn to study first. They need something to build their life on, so that it's not too hard.

When asked whether they believed that the school was actually teaching their children in such a way as to achieve their aspirations, four of the families claimed that they were happy with what the schools were doing for their children, but two had some criticisms or reservations.

It's really up to the child and depends on their ability and eagerness. I am happy with our son's work at _____. There have been no problems. I've never had word to go to the school. The eldest left at year 10 and I was happy with it all. The youngest has stayed on at _____, although we moved to _____, because we know other parents and friends in the area and really like the schools and what they are doing.

We are happy with what the school is doing, but a child's first teaching is from the home. How can the teacher be responsible for the whole class? Just two or three children are difficult enough. If the child doesn't have the ability and the background from the home, the school can't do anything.

They are not doing as well as I would like, and I don't know whether it's the children's fault or the teachers'. We used to go up to the primary

school and be told the children were doing fine, but then one of them had to repeat a year. I was furious that the teacher hadn't said there was a problem. Teachers should inform parents about their children's progress. My husband was asked to go up to the school, but 10.30 was impossible—he shut up early at 3.15 instead. The teacher could have told us over the phone at least, then we could have done something.

The school doesn't push hard enough—there's no homework. The children should be forced to study more. Children aren't progressing the way they should in public schools, but we don't know why this is.

Four of the families interviewed felt a lack of English inhibited them from helping their children, but all spoke of supporting their children in their study and supplying them with what aid they could.

We want to help—I can read, but not write, English, so it's difficult, but we do what we can to help.

If the child has a dream or goal, the parents should support it, but it must be the dream of the child, not the parents We're careful of the company our children keep—we like their friends to be interested in school.

The children decided what subjects to take—they study at home, do their homework. If a child is eager to learn, it doesn't matter where you put them. We think that public schools may be better than private schools—they all teach the same things. As parents, we offer support and encouragement, so that the children want to go on and that makes it easier for them, but we can't help with the English.

Teachers and parents have got to work together, they must both help the children. There's not enough homework. We're limited by our lack of English, but help as much as we can, and have bought a set of encyclopedias for the children to use.

I ask about their homework and they say they've done it. I couldn't help them with their homework myself, but if they said they needed help, I'd find a way to help them. We spent a lot of money on a maths kit with tapes to help them, but they only use it when they've got exams. One of my sons came third in the class, but I don't think he's good enough, because he'd had the questions the day before and looked them up—he doesn't really know how to do it.

We're not in the schools and don't understand English well enough, but young children don't have that gusto to go to school. If they're not going willingly, perhaps they should have a little bit of fear. When my children were in primary school, I asked the teacher why they weren't punished and he said that they weren't allowed, but how can I punish them at home, if it's not done at the school? Anything the school says they need, we'll do for them. It's our joy to see them progress well at school.

Parent's Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's School Experience

Most parents stressed the respect that they had had for their teachers, and one felt that the academic standards were higher, while two parents commented on the accepted non-involvement of their own parents with the school system.

It was very hard. There were no teaching aids like they have now. The teacher had to do it all. There was just one book, usually second-hand, and that was it.

It was a lot tougher, more difficult. What we learnt in primary school, children aren't even learning in high school now It was very disciplined, you had to wear an apron over your uniform. There was corporal punishment, but we had respect for teachers, not like here. The parents weren't involved, the school looked after its own area.

I might not have a degree, but I was educated for common sense. There were a lot of children and not much money, but we were brought up to be good Christian people. There should be discipline, so that there is respect for teachers, rather than fear. Things should be tougher, because at the moment it is too lax, you need rules and guidelines.

When I was in primary school, I had homework. We were frightened of and had respect for the teacher, and felt that we had to do our work well. If you did anything wrong, you had to go up the next day with your parents. There were no P&Cs or mothers' clubs, but we used to get a glass of milk and some cheese.

The teachers were more strict and pushed the children to learn more. It used to be great to begin with, but rapidly got harder. In those days the children were frightened of their teachers and had enormous respect for them, although it's more lax in Greece now, too.

The teachers were separate from students in that they were in sought after positions as top government officials. They dressed respectably as public servants should, and we had to say hello respectfully to them in the street The way I was taught, the teachers could really see whether we were doing well or not. From year 3 upwards, primary school children should be preparing for high school.

With regard to their children's school experience, several parents felt that school was much easier for their children than it had been for them, but that such easiness brought problems of its own.

Now children have everything, so if they are willing, they'll learn more easily. But there's too much independence and this leads to less respect everywhere, towards teachers and parents. Children today are over-confident.

The children aren't scared, don't feel that they have to do things. Even our high school girl is different from the younger ones, in the time she's gone through, things have changed. Everything is freer. For the youngsters, it's too free. Rather than work on making the child accept the discipline, the teacher takes the easy way out by just throwing the child out of the classroom to play. That's the biggest fault that we find with education here.

The teachers don't push as much here. It's not that the work is necessarily easier, but the children just seem to come home and watch TV and have no questions to answer. If they were just given a little bit to do, they'd be happier about going to school, because they'd be learning something, but as it is, they just go, come home, and forget with TV.

The first issue is that the teachers shouldn't be dressed like Gypsies—they don't look like gentlemen and ladies, the way they dress. Short skirts on teachers who sit in front of the class—it's not good. I blame the Education Department ... and I would much prefer a school uniform.

The children are friends with their teachers here, whereas we were a little scared of them in Greece. I have been up to the school and told them to use the cane on my children if necessary—although I know they're not allowed to.

With the exception of one parent who said they couldn't really tell, all the other parents had varied ideas about how their children learnt best.

They don't like it when the teachers just tell them something verbally, it's not enough. They need to see it written on the blackboard as well.

They probably learn better if they're not scared [as we were, a bit, in Greece] But the teacher is important because the child's progression can slow down. Our daughter was good in kindergarten, she could write her name and letters [the boy has just started to in year 3], but she didn't pick up after kindergarten till Year 4—so there are good and bad teachers.

They learn better when it's a little more strict.

I'm not sure if using calculators doesn't mean that people don't think as much. My daughter will start off on a problem with pencil and paper, but when it becomes hard, she just gets out the calculator and finishes it off in no time. We had to learn to do it in our heads, the hard way.

They should have a little bit of respect, be more reticent about their teachers, not terrified, as we were. Here the teachers are more like friends, playmates, but it is too free. I would still be terrified if I met my teacher from Greece now.

Current Parent Involvement in Schooling

When asked about their current involvement with their children's school, half of the group of parents interviewed claimed that they weren't involved with the school, and the rest talked about their limited experience of the school.

I haven't been involved in anything, but I've been to parent/teacher nights.

We have no time, we both work the sandwich/lunch bar from 4.30 am. till 3.30 pm.

We are not involved, because we both work, and also we're not living close to the school any more.

When the children were in primary school, I used to go up to some things at the school, when I wasn't working, but I don't go up to the high school—it's too difficult, I don't understand and feel embarrassed.

I'm only asked for help if there's a fete on at the school. The children go to sports, and swim every year, but we parents aren't involved. The children go on too many excursions, they'd be better off doing work at school, rather than running and jumping about.

I went to a meeting once, and only one man and one lady turned up. How can parents participate, then? I go to meetings if I have to, and we get questionnaires and forms from the school for ideas and we always fill those out.

However, even if they seldom went up to the school grounds, or were too busy to be involved with the school, all parents said that they felt themselves to be part of the school community.

I don't go up to the school now because the children are older. It was different when they were in primary school, I'd take them up and talk to the other mothers.

They used to have a community group at the school from all backgrounds—a Cypriot lady ran it—but now I do shift-work and can't go any more. The group raised money for a photocopier for the school, but children today think they know everything and show no respect—I don't know whether it's from TV or the school.

We spent five years in _____ previously, and from living in the area, knew other parents and our children's friends, which is why we let the children stay on there.

English is a problem—there aren't many other Greek mothers.

We don't go to the school and talk to the teachers, but we often discuss the school with other parents and our children's friends. The school children, when they don't have lessons, just take their bags and go and wander in the streets. They have to be caught a number of times before a letter is sent to the parents. Only after a month is a letter sent, and it's too late. The children just throw the letter away. The parents are working and think the children are safe at school, and they can't go and stand outside the school to watch. The children can lie to their parents, because they've got a better grasp of English.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

Only one parent claimed to have heard of the government plan to devolve responsibility for budget and management to local public schools and school communities. A number of parents expressed concern over the proposed school council's ability to reach agreement. It was also suggested that those parents on the committee would need to have had a fairly high level of education themselves in order to know what to do.

Do you think that those few people should have control of the school? That's the government's job. There would be in-fighting between the different communities. A lot of the parents wouldn't have had any education, so how would they know what to do anyway? A school council will divide the school community. The ethnic groups will split and want their own children to have things in the school, so there shouldn't be one representative for each group. Multiculturalism is bringing Australia together—but this will split it up. It's okay to teach the different languages under the one school roof, and it's good to be able to speak other languages, but it will still divide the children and promote racism. We have to follow the laws of the land in Australia—if we give it back to all the different ethnic groups, they'd want to bring their own laws in.

If someone was not working and they had the time, it would be okay, because it is good for parents to be involved with the school.

The Greek language schools here have such committees. We heard that they raised some money, but couldn't agree with the headmaster how it was to be spent, so there are problems. It's probably a bad idea, I don't know how it would work, or anything about it.

Who's going to have the time to do all this? With 500 different families, you'd get 500 different opinions. You'd have to have an enormous belly to swallow all these and come up with a decision. The government is the only one who could make the decisions. Say someone was president for the first year and then he resigned, and no-one wanted to take over the job, what happens then, does the school close? Most bosses of businesses in the area don't live there, and they'd want to help the schools where they live. Pensioners would have the time, but they wouldn't want to do it—they've worked hard and done their bit—it's their children's responsibility now. And the council would have to be highly educated. The workers couldn't do it and they haven't the time.

It depends on the committee—if the ones in charge spend the money on the right things, things that are needed, or not. I think all schools should be the same, not different because of different committees. The government is the one that knows best how to allocate the money. How do you know the committee voted in will do the right thing—just like politics? If there's 600 children and 300 families, only a few parents will be able to get on the committee, so the rest won't be looked after.

Whatever government is in power, we're going to pay tax, and the government will get the money, so they should spend it. There is always going to be Department of Education. Australia gives help overseas to other countries—but we should look after the children here first, too.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers.

On the whole, the parents preferred to leave the school curriculum to the 'experts'. Only one parent was prepared to see parental involvement in school management, but felt that it would only be possible for the unemployed.

Parents shouldn't be involved in management or curriculum. It sounds very strange to us. That's up to the teachers, isn't it?

It's good to have a P&C in a school, but they shouldn't have control. It's okay meeting once or twice to see what's happening at the school—but not for management. Communities fall apart after a little while.

Parents should be involved in school management, but only those not working could manage that. But they shouldn't participate in curriculum. Children should learn Maths, English and Chemistry—what the Education Department says they should and not just what the parents think they should. The Chinese might want them to learn Chinese. It's not good if it's compulsory, there has to be a choice. Every school should teach the same things and the basic subjects at least.

The parents wouldn't be able to agree on what was needed. All the different ethnic groups are going to want their subjects taught, so it won't be good—it will start arguments between the different ethnic groups. I wouldn't know what subjects my children should be taught—the school should know that.

The students should have a school uniform—they'd only need two, one to wash and one to wear. The government should have an agreement, a contract for all school uniforms. The local councils should look after the school's maintenance—plumbing and electricity. Highly respected professors from the Department of Education should plan the curriculum, and it should be the same for all schools. There should be inspectors to check out the schools and if a child can't answer their questions, then the teacher would be in trouble.

It wouldn't work out—how would the parents know? It's better for the kids to have a list and decide from that, as they do now. I haven't been to high school, but I think that years 7 to 10 should all have the same

syllabus (as they do in primary school), then years 11 and 12 can decide what they want differently. But parents should have a say in what they want in their children, what sort of adults they'll be, because the school plays an important role in what they'll be like, too.

I want my children to go on and finish and get their HSC, but they say they don't want to, and this worries me. I don't know if it's because of our own lack of English or what.

The best way is to do what you are doing, going out and asking the parents what they think.

While one parent argued for senior students rights to request special equipment or different subjects, the other parents generally felt that their children should not or would not be in a position to make beneficial choices in school management or curriculum.

They shouldn't have any say in either.

It's not a good idea for students to be involved—they wouldn't want to learn anything, and they'd only buy what they wanted, too.

It's not for the children. They should only be able to choose from amongst subjects that the school has decided upon.

The students should learn all that the school provides, and neither the parents nor the children should decide. Everything should be step by step and block by block to face the wall at eighteen as a lady or a gentleman. It's for the students to learn for themselves—they'd choose too little.

In Years 11 and 12, if the students need special equipment or different subjects, then they can ask, but not before that.

We don't want the children in on it, because they are not in a position to decide what subjects should be offered to them. They have to learn from professors, not pretend to be them, the other way around. Our children went to the school counsellor asking what subjects to take to do this or that. How could they decide for others? It should be left as it is, it's fine.

Most of the parents recognised that a child's success at school depended on both the child and the teacher and prompt communication between parent and teacher, although one parent spoke of the adverse effects teachers and school-mates could have on children who weren't succeeding.

The children don't have just one, but many teachers in high school, so it's hard to answer that question. It's not all the responsibility of the teacher, because the child has to put in an effort, too.

I spoke to a boy who left school in 4th year, who said that when he didn't know things, the teacher and the other kids made fun of him, so he would leave school and go to the park for the day. The children who aren't doing well, shouldn't be hit, but should be encouraged to do better and something should be found that they can do well. The school-master should know and help the child, not let the others laugh at him, because it will lead to his giving up. It's like giving factory workers doing the same job, one \$150 but the other only \$100.

It is up to the teacher, although you can't blame him if the child doesn't want to or can't learn.

At the parent/teacher meeting you can bring the report and can talk to the teacher Strictness does pay off, but you can't say it's all the teacher's fault—the child could be talking and not listening, the child could be wagging or the mother might say 'stay at home, it's raining' or the child might lack the ability or not want to learn. So it depends on the child, too. But the teacher tells at the parent/teacher meeting how the child is going.

We are pleased with our children's good marks They are friends with their teachers. Our children have liked school and always done well—it's been a good effect.

The teacher is responsible—if the child is not listening, they should let the parent know, so something can be done. Calling the child a clown only means that they won't respect him. Respect has to work both ways.

I can really only talk about my daughter—her teacher's been marvellous, but it's up to the parents as well as the teacher. You can't put all the blame on the teacher. Sometimes, if a child can't learn, it's nobody's fault. It's up to the child to ask for help, if they don't understand. Sometimes my daughter can't do her maths, but she says 'don't worry, I'll ask the teacher'. She's not frightened, and that's why she's learning.

Responsibility of Schooling

Four of the six families interviewed nominated the parents themselves as having the prime responsibility for their children's schooling.

The parents first and the teachers second.

The school firstly, but only for education and learning. As far as being a person in the community, and for their ethical, moral being, the home supplied by the family is responsible.

Firstly the parents in the home. Secondly the teacher in the school.

Firstly the parents. But the teachers make the school. Good teachers make a good school.

The headmaster of the school—he controls the teachers. The teachers send them on a lot of excursions, but I don't like them to go on the train, I'd rather pay extra to hire a bus as it's not so dangerous.

Firstly the parents. Secondly the rules within the school. Four years ago, they used to leave at Year 10, but the government said stay on to Year 12, and that's good, because the children get a higher education by going on to year 12. But I know children who've left because in their hearts they've wanted to. It is up to the teacher to show the light towards more education. It used to happen in Greece, too, but with more equipment, they should be able to do something about it now.

Parents of Arabic Speaking Background

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in Meeting Aspirations

When the parents were asked what they wanted their children to gain from going to school all but two of the parents spoke of their wishes for their children to gain good marks in the HSC, which would allow them the choice of a university course.

I want the best for my children from their schooling, both the boys and the girls, because I didn't attend school myself. I want them to get good marks in the HSC so they can choose—my daughter in Year 12 wants to do medicine.

I want them to finish to Year 12, then they can choose whether they'll go to university or whatever. This is more important for the boys, as the girls will all marry and their husbands probably won't want them to work.

I want them to gain the HSC scores that will enable them to attend university. I have the same aspirations for both the boys and the girls. Our religion doesn't differentiate, it teaches 'if you kiss the boy, you kiss the girl as well'.

To achieve good things. I'd like them to be able to become doctors and engineers, but I can't say that they should, it will be up to them. Language may be a barrier, because they're not getting home support in it, but I'm working hard to support them in every way I can.

I would like them to be very proficient in both Arabic and English and to be taught these at the same school. _____ did have after school classes in Arabic last year, which one of the children went to, but I think it should be part of the school curriculum. I'd like them to do very well, but will leave the choice of work/vocation up to them.

I want the best for my children, but the high school is not strict enough. It's like a supermarket, the children can go in and out and no-one watches, so the children don't learn. I don't differentiate between the boys and the

girls—it depends on their own intelligence and wit. But the school is far too lax. It doesn't inform the parents if the children are truanting and encourages children to leave at age fourteen.

Three of the parents said that they were generally content with what the schools were doing and confident that their aspirations for their children would be met. Two others, however, had quite severe criticisms. One mother, claiming that she didn't really know what the school was doing, turned and asked her daughters if they were being taught alright—the girls said that they were.

According to their age and level, our children are doing well, even in English, although we can't help them there.

I am generally happy with what the children are doing, but it's up to the school, I can't go up and tell them what to do.

I encourage my children to find out and get what they want from the teachers. It's the teachers' job to explain, so if the children don't understand, they should ask. If we parents can do anything, we will.

The school isn't teaching my children what I want for them. There's not enough homework in primary school, except for Year 4—and the girl in Year 9, in high school gets some—but the school is not supporting the parents' efforts. We try to provide everything we can, but the children leave the schoolgrounds and go up the road to McDonalds. They have too much extra freedom, for example, after sports, they just wander off, instead of returning to school before coming home.

The system is to blame for the gap, not the individual teachers, but my children are not achieving as well as I would like, because of this wrong in the system. I was talking to the principal of _____, and he blamed the children for non-achievement. When I asked the principal about private schools, I was told that the fathers had to pay. But I argued that if I sent one son to a public and one son to a private school and they turned out differently, then the schools would have done it, because they would be treated the same at home. The principal then said that at private schools, the teachers could send a child home if they weren't in uniform, tell the parents if their homework wasn't done, and punish the child for misbehaviour, but that he couldn't do that, because he didn't have the authority. So I think the system is wrong for not allowing state schools this authority.

The majority of these parents saw their role as supportive and felt that this was the main assistance that they could provide for their children. Some claimed that lack of English placed limits on their ability to provide help with academic matters. One parent said that he had had cause to remove his son from the school.

I always encourage my daughter. I tell her that it's her future and she has to work hard for it. If she needs anything, we'll buy it for her, but she's the one who has to approach and try things. I give them time to study, everything is ready when they come home from school. I still teach them things of the home, but as long as I am healthy, they should focus on their study for school. I always ask them what they are learning, because I'm very interested in their work.

I get them things they need, like books and pens and things, but the language difference is a problem. I explain what I can when I'm asked.

I want to know from the school and the teachers how the children are going, what they're learning, so that I can support that and make sure the child is working towards their goals. If I know from the beginning that the child is misbehaving, having problems, I can do something about it in time—but if things are left, not attended to early on, it becomes too late to change.

I wish that the children would listen to their parents more, instead of watching TV. In Lebanon, the whole family would talk and discuss things My eldest son helps the primary school children if they have problems. I bought a set of encyclopedias for them so that they wouldn't have to cross the road to the library so much, I don't like them to have to do that.

Language prohibits us from doing more for the children's schoolwork, but we certainly tell them what's right and wrong and encourage them to go on and support them in their study.

I'm thinking of placing the high school children in a Catholic school, as a lot of students graduate in Street Kids from _____. If the Catholic schools refuse them because they are Muslim, it will be a case of discrimination. I've already sent one son to Lebanon with my wife, and there is a war there, but this was better than letting him continue jiggling school. He had done this for a year and a half without my being told, and he'd been away thirty days before I was notified. When I asked him, he said that he'd only been late for roll-call, but that meant the school didn't know he was really there. So I went to ask at the school and they said they would have to check, but that was six months ago and they still haven't got back to me. I've heard of children who turn up for roll-call, but then skip the classes.

Parent's Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's School Experience

One parent had had no schooling, and another felt that he 'didn't spend long enough time there to describe it now', but most of the parents spoke of stronger discipline and 'a family feeling'.

I was not at school long—we were from a small village, and I would have had to travel too far—but I felt that the teacher was like an older brother or a parent who was concerned about my learning. It was more strict, although I don't know whether this was for better or for worse, but

children should respect the teacher and listen to him. I prefer a stricter situation.

I didn't like learning about the French Revolution, and also didn't want to have to learn French—it wasn't useful—English would have been better I was at a private school, and I think that private schools everywhere are better than public ones. It depends on the teacher, but in general, the Lebanese teaching style and discipline were much better than in Australia. The school had a family feeling, teachers showing a special concern that children behave morally, ethically. It used to be part of the curriculum. I remember how I went and walked with a blind beggar, talking with him for several hours, after my teacher had told us that we should feel concern for those less fortunate than ourselves.

It was much more disciplined. The teachers explained more and were more respected. There was no answering back. They were much more strict—I was sent home once for having untidy hair We used to have to go to school in Lebanon like this, with our heads down, not looking from side to side, not talking to boys, and boys would be reported if they tried to speak to girls.

The content was broader, we learnt more about the world, and the teaching style and discipline were better. The school was more in control and the teachers were respected. It was a family feeling. My own parents used to ask the teachers all the time about our progress.

On the matter of his children's schooling one parent felt that as he didn't know what his children were learning, he couldn't make comparisons, and another that as he hadn't observed the teaching style in the classroom, he didn't like to make assumptions, but there was general concern about too much freedom and lack of discipline.

It's much more casual in Australia—the teachers are not respected by the students. Parents and teachers together have to teach children about respect. They have to work together, side by side, from the same values. Here, children can run away from home at sixteen, but they aren't ready for it, their minds are too little. Schools should discipline more and be more authoritative.

There's a narrower concept of subjects. The different teaching style is good, but it gives too much extra freedom, and too much freedom causes trouble in the family. I find things out through the community—someone else will tell me if they see my son or daughter on the street.

Maths is different now, I can't help the children with it. It's a very different environment here compared to Lebanon. There you had to respect your teachers and your parents more, here there is extra freedom for children and not so much pressure to learn, and it's not a good thing, because children learn unnecessary things too soon.

I'm very happy with what they're learning—French at school, Arabic after school. But school discipline is too soft. At home, we have our own way of disciplining.

Responses to the question about how their children learnt best varied greatly, but in the main issues of respect and discipline were raised, as well the notion of set homework.

They like studying best, with books from the library. I make sure that TV stops at a certain hour, so there is time for study and time for TV.

It's not for the parents to say—it's up to the government to decide. The decisions are made higher up. But there is no respect for teachers and no discipline. Children smoke outside of class. Look at the *Most Wanted* program on TV—criminals do wrong three or four different times and yet they're out again in a few months. It's symptomatic of our society, where wrongdoing is disregarded.

Children need to have a sense of religious conviction in order to refrain from stealing etc. when parents or police are not around. Fear of God leads to a respect for others and others' property. Children are using their freedom for the wrong things, and the media only exacerbates this.

Probably private schools teach better and give harder work to students.

There's not enough work for the children, and if the teacher was more in control, they'd learn better. They say the homework was done at school and come in and throw their books down, but the teachers are limiting the children's ability by not setting homework.

It's up to the children. School only teaches reading and writing, not how to think for the future or to be mature. I prefer single sex schools for girls as they do better, and I'm not happy about school encouraging the girls to wear shorts and short dresses.] This parent's younger daughter then commented that the school didn't tell them to do that, it was just what she and the other girls preferred.]

Current Parent Involvement in Schooling

For most of the parents, finding the time to devote to school activities, they said, was very difficult.

We go to meetings when necessary and to social occasions if we have the time.

I work late hours six days a week and so have no time. My wife usually goes to meetings and things, but she has the two little children to look after.

I attend meetings when they are on, if it's necessary and I'm not too busy. Fetes and things.

I don't have time to go to the school and be involved in its activities, I work long hours six days a week. My wife doesn't like going to the school because of her lack of English.

I attend meetings, where I translate, interpret, for the school. I taught scriptures in the primary school, but I am limited in what I can do by the time that I must spend with my children. They are my most precious things, so I have a particular schedule at home with them, reading, praying, taking them to the mosque. There are two environments, the home and the school, and I have to work on the home one more and more to counter-balance the effect of the school.

My husband goes to meetings when he receives letters from the school. I like to know about everything that's happening in the children's schools.

However, although many of the parents felt they may not have had the time to involve themselves in school activities, they still (with the notable exception of one parent) felt part of the school community.

Yes, because my children are there and that links me with the school. I would be quite happy to go to the school premises, and talk to the teachers. I know other parents with children at the school.

Yes, I am comfortable going to the school and talking to teachers and other parents, but I don't allow my children to have friends home unless I ask them myself, and I'm here to watch that everything is alright.

No—I am not happy with that community. Sometimes, between ourselves, we refer to the school as The Criminal Institute, because of the lack of discipline. The values of the community are abhorrent and I fear it for the threat it offers to my children and their future. My children have told me 'if you're not with us, we can get drugs through the school anytime'.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

With regard to the government devolution proposal for public education, only one parent 'knew a little bit about it, from the radio', but couldn't say 'whether it's a good or bad idea as I haven't seen it working'. The others had not heard about the plan and were divided on its feasibility.

I haven't heard of a school council system. Will the position of parent representative on the council be paid, given the time it would involve? How would the other parents contact the representative?

I think that it's a way of eventually making the parents pay for more things. The older the children are, the more the parents have to pay for their education.

Things are always being changed, for example, the school that was going to be for girls only was made co-educational, and then the number of teachers was cut. Children are upset by the teacher cuts—there are more to a class and they get less attention. With thirty in a class you can't take turns at answering. The cuts have affected my children's grades—they're not doing as well as they used to.

In Lebanon, the school is like a factory and runs itself. If it works there, why do they need to bring in the parents here? Can't they manage it? Most parents both work and wouldn't have the time If I, as a parent, say to the representative on the council that I don't want the children to leave the school at lunch-time, will that be listened to, or will they just say 'we don't want that'?

I don't think it's a good idea, although it could work if someone who was responsive was chosen and issues were discussed between parents first.

I think it's a good idea, but I don't personally have time to be involved.

If the council is going to consider what the parents want and agree with them, it would be a good thing. If the teachers were more strict, as we parents wish they were, then we wouldn't worry so much.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers

Only two parents felt that parent participation in school management might bring forth positive results. Three of the parents felt that they either wouldn't be listened to, or they would be unable to change the attitudes of the schools or the government. Four of the six families, however, did want to see some form of parent intervention or at least consultation when it came to curriculum.

I always go to school meetings and it's always the same because the school doesn't listen to what the parents want. They just go their own way. I would like to see single sex schools Children learn more values from the school, because of the time they spend there, and this creates problems at home.

I think my children should be taught Arabic at school, because being fluent in two languages enriches, and in this way they would be able to communicate with us, rather than the gap widening. Most importantly, there should be some religious or scriptural classes which would teach morals and ethics.

If parents can speak English and know what's happening and have the time, it's very good for them to participate. And if those parents are doing the best for the children, then I'd be happy for them to represent me, although I don't know what I'd like to see happen.

But parents should intervene to say what their children should learn in cultural and religious areas. The Department of Education should first approve what the teacher has prepared, then the parents should be consulted.

Parents don't have any power, no matter what. They wouldn't be able to change the attitudes of the schools and government and they couldn't change anything in the curriculum ... I am concerned for the safety of my children when they are at school. Someone should be observing the children, watching what they're doing all the time, standing at the gate.

Parents could do a lot if they worked in groups that thought the same way, that could have a great effect. Children should be taught in the two languages right from kindergarten. The only Arabic classes available are after hours. There should be more work for the children, with a focus on the learning part of schooling, to keep their minds off other matters. There should be more emphasis on home science for the girls, so they can be better housewives—I teach them all I can, but there's still a lot for them to know.

Not all parents are educated and that means they can make the wrong decisions. Parents can be too emotional, not always logical, where their children are concerned. The principal is qualified, and so are the teachers, so they have to take the responsibility, although parents should be consulted. [Parents should intervene] only when something morally unacceptable is in the curriculum. My son told me that the teacher said that migrant people looked after their parents when they were old and spent money on them. When my son replied 'they looked after us, spent money on us', the teacher retorted that it wasn't necessary. I don't feel that the teacher should have said that. The primary teacher said that human beings were descended from monkeys, so one of the children asked the teacher if she knew which monkey was her father. Muslims are taught that humans descended from Adam and Eve—don't Christians believe this, too?

Parents don't have the expertise or the time to participate in school management and they wouldn't be listened to anyway. The curriculum is the school's responsibility, the teachers' and the principals'.

With regard to student participation, the parents on the whole were concerned that immature students would not make appropriate choices. There were, however, some in favour of the children's opinions being taken into consideration.

Students should have a say and there should be the same fees for all schools, no matter what subjects the students are doing. They should have a say, but the teachers don't listen.

Only a mature child who was aware of other's expectations and plans would be able to represent the other children. My children brought marbles home but I threw them out. They said that they got them from school and that the teacher said they have to play. You can't trust children to want to learn—they would only choose more days of sport or

swimming. Going on camps only encourages children to leave home and sleep out at others' places.

If the students want something, they should be listened to. They know what's good for them and can discuss it with their family. In Lebanon, the decisions of the children weren't taken into account, but it's good that they're listened to here. In Lebanon, what children could do depended on their marks.

If the student is mature, has a good record and consults with the others, then it would be alright, [but students should have a say on curriculum] only within certain limitations, because they would be tempted to choose things that were not good for them.

Children won't take a serious attitude to learning and will just want freedom. They're not mature enough for such responsibility and will just want to play. Both management and curriculum are the entire responsibility of the professionals—the principal and the teachers.

The students may not know, they could choose an immature child to represent them. Each child has different plans for their own future, but if they can all agree and want that person to represent them, then it's okay. Children's decisions should be taken into account. They should be involved [in curriculum], because each child knows what they need for their future plans, and if they're not getting the right groundwork, they should say, and not have to do things just because somebody else wants to do those things. After year 5, the child has already made its plans for the future and wants to work towards them.

With regard to the teacher's role, one parent felt that it was the teacher's 'whole responsibility' and another that the child would fail if the teacher wasn't 'doing their job'. Most, however, felt that it was essential that the teacher not 'ignore' bad behaviour or failure, whether they dealt with the child directly or went to the parents.

If the teacher's not doing their job, then the child is going to fail. The government cuts last year have affected children badly—the classes are larger which makes it more difficult for both them and their teachers. The children can't learn as well, because they don't get as much of the teacher's attention.

If the teacher ignores what the children are doing and does not discuss with the parents if the children aren't doing their homework or are skipping school, then the teacher is failing in doing their job. A teacher contacted me and told me that my son wasn't listening to him in class, but talking to his friends, and taking notice of them instead. I told my son not to listen to his friends, even if they were the ones talking, and not him, and it worked—I haven't heard any complaints about him since.

It is the teacher's whole responsibility, because even if the child's a low-achiever, if the teacher wants to help, it will make a difference. I have been told that kids swear at and even hit the teachers. Why do the teachers let them? Teachers should be allowed to hit kids, the cane should be introduced. We voted for it, but it wasn't brought in.

The teacher may give all the class the same, but sometimes they can discriminate and this causes the child to withdraw and not participate, and so the child fails. It's not good to have favourites, even though it might benefit the favoured child—I am against it.

The teacher can lead or advise children to a better future or to get a good job, but if the teacher ignores the child's bad behaviour, and doesn't explain the consequences of this bad behaviour on the child's future, then this is bad for the child as it leads to failure. The method of teaching can cause success or failure for a child.

The teacher has a great effect, and there are ways in which they can cause a student's failure, but ultimately it's between the teacher, the parent, the child and the school if a child fails. Most teachers are honest, even if some are not, although honest people can still do bad things.

Responsibility for Schooling

While two parents felt that the government should take the responsibility, and one that it was shared between the parents and the school, three felt that the school itself, the principal and the teachers, had the main responsibility.

It's entirely up to the government and its policies. If they were really concerned, they'd be encouraging children to become engineers and doctors instead of importing them from other countries. They should educate and support their own children towards these aims. My nephew was just wandering around after leaving Year 10. It was too late, he should have been told by the school to enrol at TAFE for the mechanics course, but missed out and had to wait for another year.

The school, from the executive, through to the principal, down to the teachers.

It should be shared between the parents and the school—no one party is totally responsible.

The principal, the deputy principal, and then the teachers. There should be inspectors to check on teaching and curriculum and the goals that are set. Although some children can disturb others in the classroom.

The government is responsible—but each one is in power for too short a time and every time a new one comes into power, they change things, and these cuts are bad for the children.

The school executives, the principal and the deputy, and if they don't succeed, they should discuss the problems with the parents.

Parents of Vietnamese Speaking Background

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in Meeting Aspirations

When the parents were asked what they wanted their children to gain from going to school five of the parents spoke of university aspirations for their children, but the sixth, simply of 'good HSC marks'.

I would like them to do well in Maths and English, and I want them to achieve skills so that they can contribute to and help Australian society. I would like them to gain good HSC marks as I would very much like them to go to university, the girl as well as the boys.

I would like them to achieve higher qualifications and more knowledge than I have obtained. Circumstances in Vietnam prevented me from further study. I want them to get good HSC marks, but it's up to their own talents, how they actually go. But my children will be working for this Australia, so I hope the education they are receiving will equip them to do that well.

I would like them to go to university, if possible, but at least gain good HSC marks, both the boy and the girl.

I would like them to get good HSC marks so they can go to university, but I won't force them. I would like them to achieve the most that their abilities allow.

I would like them to attend university and become doctors and engineers so that they can contribute to and help Australian society. I hope that school will help them to eventually do this by teaching them the right skills and imparting knowledge.

I want them to gain the requisite HSC marks to attend university.

Four parents were relatively content with what the schools were providing to ensure the fulfilment of their aspirations for their children. One however, was concerned with his daughter's recent grades and another frankly didn't know his son's situation at the school yet.

Effectively about 80%—the children are achieving more and more each term, but parents have to give more time and more training, too.

I'm happy with _____. The children like the teachers and the friends that they know, and would rather stay with them than go to a better school.

I think that the school is effectively providing the things that my children need.

It's not up to the teacher, but up to the children how they learn. I am happy with what the school is doing.

My daughter kept up in Year 10, but she's fallen behind in Maths and Physics in Year 11. I'm very upset about this, and would like to provide some support for her schooling, but it's too expensive. One of the boys has level grades, and the other was put up a year because of the school at Lakemba.

When we came here I was worried that the children might be at a disadvantage, because although we'd been refugees in Hong Kong, with all the rights of Hong Kong residents, the teachers there were not qualified. I thought that _____ would be good to help the children's English, because they've got interpreters there to help the children keep up with the English-speaking students. Our son went to _____ first, then to _____, then _____. He's been there now for one year, and I've had no contact from the school, except for one meeting last term. On that occasion I met just one teacher—I still don't know the others, or where my son's classroom is, so I really don't know what the school is teaching my son or how he is doing.

With regard to the question of how they as parents were able to help their children, one parent felt that more homework should be given that they could oversee, and another looked to the teachers to tell him how to help his children, but the others seemed to think that the best things they could do were to advise and support the children in the home.

I have no time to teach them myself, as I am busy all hours in the restaurant, but I advise them to work hard, read books at home, and finish all their homework.

I can't help with the lessons at school, through lack of English and knowledge, so the main thing is to support them—take them to school when it's raining and provide what they need to work with.

Parents have to know the aim of schooling, and love Australia, to build it up. I find out my children's interests, and get books on these topics for them, then just work hard to support them.

If the teacher gave more homework, the parents could help at home by asking the children to review it for them—not enough homework is set for them.

There should be close co-operation between schools and parents. The teachers should know how the students think—what they think and want—so that they can tell the parents how they can help the children at home. Teachers have to help parents understand how to teach their children at home. Parents are very busy here, they work hard, have big families and have no time, but if the teacher says that the child has a problem, then the parents should take time to help.

I always encourage my children to learn and although I can't help them with their English, I do with their Maths. The school is very important in achieving what I want for my children.

Parents' Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's Experience

Although for one mother her schooldays were 'so long ago now I can't remember—not even whether I enjoyed it or not', the other parents spoke of a very structured learning experience, and the 'power' of their teachers.

My parents were very busy and had their own work to do, so as students, we had to work by ourselves. We had to finish our homework before we went to school the next day. Each child had to summarise the lesson for the teacher—we were reviewed individually. We all had to stand up when the teacher entered the room, and were not allowed to sit down until he had given us permission to do so.

The teacher was very powerful over the child, and if the child was not working well, the parents would not be happy. The teachers loved their job, and did it for the children's sake. I still remember and love the teachers in whose subjects I did well.

I also wanted higher qualifications for myself, so that I could help society. In Vietnam, by year 7, we were learning Chemistry, Maths and Science, but here, they're just writing stories. It's a lot easier here. In Vietnam, the teacher controlled the students and their work—you had to finish all your studies effectively in order to go up to the next year. Here, the students do what they want and know that they'll go on next year regardless. There are no controlled exercises set by the teachers.

It was very different. Teachers were highly respected, like parents, and children listened to them. They were powerful, not like friends, on the same level like they are here. They ordered like parents, and the children obeyed.

Education should not be compulsory, it's up to the interest of the child concerned. I enjoyed it, and learning more, having more knowledge, helps you later not just in your work, but also with your position in society. You can help society and contribute to it. All of this made learning easier and happier for me, but the child who is made to go to school, and doesn't like it, will fall behind.

With regard to their children's school experience, one mother claimed that she couldn't make any comparisons, because she didn't know what it was like here, but that she trusted 'the teachers are doing their best for the children to learn'. Others spoke of the vocational dedication of the teachers in Vietnam, while one father talked of the difficulty he had encountered in trying to obtain information on his son's progress.

Their love for children is not as great, they are working for the money, so the relationship between teachers and students is not as close, not as fruitful. I can remember on one occasion in Vietnam when the teachers worked right through their three month holiday period in order to get a class up to the next year's standard.

Some teachers are just working for money, rather than the love of teaching and therefore they don't pay care and attention to the children that are disadvantaged, need extra help, or are emotionally disturbed. It's more prevalent here than in Vietnam, where they worked from the heart.

In Vietnam, there was one teacher in primary school and many teachers in high school, like there is here, but there was one main tutor for the class who was responsible for the children, who had to get their subject reports and report back to the parents. Wilkins was like that—I met up with the class tutor and the subject teachers—but _____ is different. There I don't know who is what. They have a poor information process. The subject teacher I met didn't know anything about my son. It's very hard, especially with my lack of English. So the school and the parents should have a closer relationship.

The children love their teachers here. They are good and polite with their friends, and are happy to go to school. There are more and better teaching aids. The discipline in the school is not as strict as in Vietnam, but if the family trains the children to behave, then they will be good and polite at school.

While two parents felt that they could tell how their children learnt best, other parents raised the issues of homework and the success of private schooling.

I am concerned about composite classes—if my son in Year 5 is in class 5/4, then how can he ask a year 4 child for help if he hasn't understood the lesson? I am also wondering about the difference between public and private schools. I have been told by others that the private schools have better discipline, they make children finish their lessons, and enforce learning. I also understand, from the paper, that, of university graduates, the ones who attended private schools were more likely to get jobs.

I would like a tutor for my daughter, to help her understand. I am too busy myself to try and work things out and the subjects are different now. I would like more English, especially pronunciation, for the children and Maths, because it's taught differently now.

They learn best with controlled exercises checked by the teacher, and homework which has to be completed and also checked.

Teachers have to know what the student thinks inside. From the age of twelve, children recognise what's right and wrong. They might keep reports from parents and that way, the parents don't know what's going on, especially if they don't speak English. It would be better if they were sent by mail, or if the parents went to a meeting and picked up the children's reports themselves.

Current Involvement in Children's Schooling

Only one parent stated that she did not have the time to be involved with the school, although she added that she did respond to their letters.

I have been to the odd meeting organised by the school.

I have attended P&C activities and report meetings—things that the school has invited me to. I've also been to a parent/teacher meeting at _____, but they only say the good things, whereas I'd prefer to be told about the problems, so that I could do something about them.

I've only been to one meeting for the high school, but I'm working closely with my daughter's primary school. There was an interpreter there who could explain the importance of the meeting about the government cuts to the parents, and let them know what was going on.

I've attended meetings and gone to see how the children were learning at school. I was told at the school that the composite classes were the result of loss of funds—they couldn't afford more teachers, so had to put two classes in together. I think that it's a very bad move. With more children in the class, there is less time for personal attention from the teacher.

Although one parent's lack of English prevented him from communicating directly with the teachers, and two others spoke of having no time to visit the school, parents generally felt themselves to be at ease with the school community.

Yes. The lack of English means that I can't talk to the teachers directly, but I'm happy to visit the school and I discuss things with other parents. I always ask after my son's schoolfriends and how they behave in class.

I haven't had a chance to contact any teachers, but I talk to other parents and my children's schoolfriends.

I know other parents with children at the schools through my community work and the prayer group, but I have no time to go to the school and talk to the teachers generally.

When asked, I am willing to contribute. I've asked how my children were going and talked to other parents.

I used to ring up a friend, occasionally, and offer to go along and interpret for them, but they didn't want it. I talk to my children's schoolfriends, to find out how they're going. There does have to be a lot of co-operation between the family and the school, but most Vietnamese parents are working during the day and occupied with their family's needs in the evening.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

Three of the parents had heard about the proposed school councils and the process of devolution through a letter from one of the schools, and a fourth from talking with other parents. Only two parents knew nothing of the plan.

I didn't know—and I don't know if it's a good or bad idea—we will have to wait and see.

No, I hadn't heard about it, but I think it's better for the government to handle the school's business, rather than a council. The government would care for the children more than individuals, even parents, would, and can train the children to become useful to society.

I had a letter from the school about it. Any business representatives would have to be educated, otherwise they could become too powerful in the wrong direction. Educational experience is most important in council members.

The school sent me a letter in Vietnamese about it. I think it's a good idea, but I can't say why.

I knew something about this from talking with other parents, but I'm not sure about how it will all happen, or even why it should. I want to observe more how the school educates children and to know more about how it all works.

I knew about it in a letter from the primary school. It's good in that it will give parents a chance to give their opinions on school decisions and curriculum.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers

One parent simply stated that 'there's no time for parents to do it' and another wanted the school to state clearly what they wanted in terms of parent participation, but the majority just felt that they wanted to know about the activities and matters of concern for the school so that they could support them.

It is vital for parents to know what the school wants and needs. It's for the teachers and principal to decide what is necessary and let the parents know. If they need funds, then fees should be in relationship to each family's resources. Not all parents would be able to make the meetings or turn up, but the school should at least offer the information and organise meetings for the ones who can.

I want to know from the school, clearly, what it wants from parents in participation. If I knew exactly what was needed, I would be happy to comply, but it has never been spelt out exactly what is expected. I could come to fix things at the school, or help to raise funds for educational equipment, but I wouldn't have the time to look after children at school.

Parents should know about school matters and participate, so that they can support the school in its needs and share with the school funds. It's much more practical for parents to be involved with curriculum planning, because they are closer to the school and can decide on finer details than the Department of Education, which can only give very broad and abstract outlines.

The school should invite the parents who have the most education, because they'd be able to manage better. The school should be able to lock into local businesses to get good prices on things like uniforms, appliances, electrical goods, brick-laying and plumbing services. I gave that idea to the P&C two to three years ago. The principal said 'who knows', but nothing's happened. It's really up to the principal to initiate things. But parents should have a chance to have a say, air their views and discuss things—some good things may arise out of it.

Parents should know about the activities of the school, although it's not necessary for them to know how the school uses its funds. But it's not for them to decide matters to do with the school management or curriculum.

With regard to student participation, most of the parents felt that the children should know how the school chose to allot its funds, but mainly as a form of training. On the whole, they argued for information to be made available to the students rather than for them to have an active input to the school system.

It's not necessary for students to know what's going on, because they don't understand enough about what is important.

Children should also know what's going on in school, because they have to work closely together with the teachers. Again, it's not necessary for them to have a say in school management, but they should be able to say what they want to be taught.

Children just bring the report cards from the school. The teachers should let the children know what the money raised has been spent on—for example, if it's books, then the children will know to look after them, and to keep them clean and untorn for others to use. Students normally should learn what the teacher is giving them, and not have anything to

say about it. Only the best, the perfect students would be able to suggest other things, after they've mastered what the teacher has given them.

Children at high school should know how the money is spent—what equipment cost, etc. That way they're trained to be responsible with property. They can be asked for their ideas, but that doesn't mean that the school has to follow them.

Children should know how the school is run—it will be good experience for them in later life. In thirty years time, when they have children at school, they will know what to do, how it works. Only high school students should have any input into how the school is managed, the primary students are too young. On the whole, they should just know, rather than have a say.

I'm not too sure about what the children would ask for—sometimes it would be alright, but sometimes not, so a decision would have to be made about a cut-off point, otherwise they'd be asking for the world. They should know what the school spends its money on. They may ask for books and things related to the subject they're studying, but not beyond that.

With regard to the role of the teacher, one parent felt that it was entirely up to the child whether they failed or succeeded, citing teacher impartiality, but the majority of the parents spoke of family influences as well.

It's up to the child—if they work hard, they'll succeed, because the teacher wants all the children to do well, and is impartial in this.

For my own children, if they said they didn't like the subject, then it wouldn't be the teacher's fault, because the child wouldn't really be paying attention, but if they said they don't understand the subject, then the teacher would be at fault, for not attending to the child and explaining better. It's 30% the parents' responsibility. They have to follow up and make sure that the children have done their homework. I only allow my children TV on Friday and Saturday nights—all other nights they have to prepare their schoolwork.

It depends on a number of factors—it could be the teacher's fault, but this is not the main factor—it could depend on the family, if older siblings or parents can help at home—but it's also how hard the children work themselves. I encourage the children to pay attention in class, because if they miss something, no-one else can help them.

I don't blame the teacher if the child fails, although it is the teacher's job to teach. The classes are too large to allow each child the individual attention they should have. Parents should support the children and allow them time for study.

There are two factors—how hard the child works and how much the teacher cares. If the teacher lets some students go and doesn't give them

the right attention or enough attention, then they'll fail. So it's between the two, really.

It's mainly up to the child. It's 80% their own hard work and innate intelligence, 10% the influence of the parents and the family, and 10% the influence of teachers and other children in the school.

Responsibility for Schooling

The parents proved to be evenly divided on this issue—two felt that the school alone had the responsibility, two the family and two the family and the school, equally.

When at school, the teachers. When at home, the parents.

The school, as it provides all the knowledge and information. The family can only support by providing food, bedding and so on. If they're highly educated, perhaps they can help, but not many families are in this position.

The teachers in the school and the parents in the home, equally.

The family first, because there must be the control there to do homework and to encourage study.

The school, because the children spend more time there and therefore have more contact with it.

The parents, because they play the most important part in the life of the child. Eastern culture describes parents as care-takers of their children from their birth to their marriage. So Austudy is very important to struggling families.

Parents of Tongan Speaking Background

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in Meeting Aspirations

When the parents of Tongan speaking background were asked what they wanted their children to gain from going to school, for the most part, they were concerned that their children should acquire 'basic skills'. Several of them mentioned the desirability of learning things of use in 'everyday living', not merely academic skills.

I want them to obtain the HSC marks that will enable them to become what they want—a pilot and an engineer.

I want them to achieve the basic skills like maths and English and the credentials to get a good job, but it is really the teacher's responsibility. I don't really have any high personal ambitions for them myself.

I would like them to learn skills other than simply academic things towards the HSC. Skills applicable to everyday living. I think that work experience should start earlier than Year 10, because by then it's too late.

I'd like them to obtain the basic skills, particularly in maths and English, that will help them get the job or enter the vocation of their choice. The girls will need better academic skills than the boys, because we want them to remain ladylike, so they should be preparing to do office work or teaching. Manual work is for the men.

When asked if the school was satisfying their expectations one parent talked of the poor skills of many school-leavers, the others spoke again of the need for other-than-academic interests or subjects in the school system.

The school should be teaching general survival and utility skills as well, not just academic subjects.

I encourage them to go on excursions and to participate in sports days, because if they are not going to be academic, these other activities might provide opportunities for them to find different interests and learn other things which may lead them eventually to jobs they'd find interesting.

The school should teach more general survival skills, things other than academic. Sewing and mechanics would be good, for boys and girls, whoever wanted to do it. Something in which the children can feel they've been successful, have achieved, rather than the HSC being a dead end, especially if they fail it.

I see a lot of students, even ones who've completed Year 12, who're sent to work at the office from the CES and who often can't do anything. Their maths is very poor and they have bad spelling. We were taught English spelling and maths better in Tonga.

With regard to what they as parents could do to assist their children, two of the parents mentioned 'making sure they do their homework', but another told how she and her husband were 'turning their lives around' to help their children.

We are turning our lives around for our children's benefit. We're moving to _____ to be nearer work, but also closer to a Catholic school for our little girl. Out of the inner city to a suburb where there are backyards for children to play in, and where other Tongan friends and relatives are established. My daughter only went to the primary school for one year because it was so close, just down the street. We speak Tongan to her at home, but she understands English as well, and is now speaking it more.

She acts as an interpreter for the other Tongan children in her class—though I'm not sure that this is altogether good for all concerned.

I try to help the children clarify their own goals while they're still at school, so that they can work towards their career.

Parent's Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's School Experience

A number of the parents spoke of stern discipline that they had experienced as part of their education, another of the rigorous teaching of English.

The teachers knew everything and the students were told what to do and say. There was no answering back, it was all very disciplined. Tongan parents were very involved in the PTA for the school, and with the teachers.

It was much stricter, you did what you were told. The teacher was respected and knew everything. The discipline was quite stern, although it was regulated according to age group.

We didn't need to learn Tongan in school in order to be able to read and write it well, but we did learn English quite rigorously. It was taught better than they teach it in Australia.

It was up to the children to do well and get a scholarship, because not many parents could afford to pay for their children's education then. I boarded at the government school. It was very poor and not well-funded. Sometimes there'd be only a banana for breakfast. We learnt science when a New Zealand- trained teacher returned to Tonga, but when he left again, after three years, that was the end of the science lessons. If you have good teachers and the opportunity, that's fine, but otherwise, it's the end of learning.

With regard to their children's school experience, some of the parents were in a position to compare Australia's education system to that in force in New Zealand. Others were concerned by the lack of discipline, swearing and the laxity between high school girls and boys.

Swearing is second nature to children here in school—but my grandchildren don't do it in the home. I am concerned at the laxity between high school boys and girls. It is taboo in Tonga, but here children can observe others in the park, and copy them. In Tonga, a mixed audience to a film showing a sexual relationship would be most uncomfortable.

Children answer the teachers back and don't respect them, and therefore they don't learn as well. There's less discipline. I do feel that the children have a greater academic chance here than in Tonga, but they'd learn better if they weren't allowed to muck up in class.

At the beginning, my children felt that they had better teachers and learnt more interesting things when they were in New Zealand, but they're adapting better now. I maintain strict discipline at home, but I'm not sure about the school, although the children's reports always come back as being well-behaved.

Our New Zealand family members who are now in Australia all feel that the New Zealand education system was a lot better and more effective than what's happening here. My son and his friend ran away from school to go off on an adventure with the friend's brother, and he told me that if I made him go back to school, he would only run away again—that he was old enough to leave anyway. He said that he wanted to make money now, like his friend Con from next door, who had left school and was working. He didn't want to spend another six years of his life studying before turning round to earn some money. If he wanted to learn something later, he could always go back.

My Tongan relatives were put out, because Tongans send their children to Australia to get a better education, and university degrees, but as I told them, I'd rather have a son who talks to me and whose welfare I can still safeguard through the family, than effectively no son at all.

A diverse number of responses was elicited with regard to the question of how they believed their children learnt best.

Children need a good teacher in order to learn.

The teacher should have the upper hand, but children have the right to ask proper questions about what they're learning. It's good that they're encouraged to be inquisitive—in Tonga, we were spoon-fed information and did not ask about it.

They'd learn better if there was more discipline and they weren't allowed to muck up in class.

I strongly believe in the Catholic school system, though I'm not a Catholic myself.

Current Parent Involvement in Children's Schooling

Although some of the parents mentioned school activities that they had attended, all four characterised themselves as 'not really involved'.

We've not been to any meetings—we both work and there's no time, but I've been to a sports day.

Nothing really. I'd like to participate more, but I only go to what I've been invited to. I've been to the primary school twice, but nothing has come from the high school.

Nothing myself, but I encourage my daughter to go. There have been no invitations from the high school, just some from the primary school.

I went to the primary school, every three weeks or so, just to help out. Once when I was invited, I took a taxi from work in the lunch hour, but I was the only one who turned up. The teacher showed me a video, on new teaching methods or something, which was quite interesting and then asked me to discuss it, which I could hardly do, seeing I was the only one there.

While none of the parents felt that they were not part of the community of their children's schools, some of them expressed an unease.

Even if I could speak English, I still wouldn't feel that it was my place to say 'we want this or that' because I lack the expertise. I'd be happy to be involved with something like fundraising, though.

At one meeting I attended, the teachers wanted the parents to write letters and petitions to lobby the government about staff cuts. There was a Greek man there who didn't understand the process, the need for a lot of letters, and he kept insisting that all they had to do was let him have a word with a friend of his in public office, and things would be fixed up. The teachers got fed up and the meeting ran out of time. On another occasion there was so much noise and confusion, each group with their own interpreters, all shouting to be heard, that I just left.

I've talked to the teachers, and participated when the teachers have been taking the children somewhere, and I know some of the other parents.

Implications of Devolution of Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

Only one of the parents said they had heard something of the plan, but all seemed to think it was a good idea.

I had heard a little bit about it. It's worth a try. If it fails, it hurts nothing, but if it succeeds, it would be tremendous for parents to pay more attention to what's going on in the school. I remember the PTA being very effective, very powerful, in Tonga.

I haven't heard about it, but I think that parent participation is a good idea.

I've heard a bit about it, but not much. It's a good idea in that it will put parents in a position where they will know a lot more about what children are being taught in schools and whether the teachers are up to scratch or not.

I haven't heard about it, but I think it's a good idea for parents who have got the expertise and good communication skills in English.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers.

All parents thought that parent participation in school management was desirable, although not many were able to elaborate why. Curriculum was seen largely as the province of the experts.

Parents should participate, especially in school management—that's why I encourage my daughter to go, she speaks better English than I do. They should also know about what their children are taught, but they would need expertise in the subject areas in order to participate in curriculum planning.

I hadn't really thought about it—but parent participation in areas other than curriculum would be good.

Parents should be able to participate in the running of the school, though there could be difficulties getting everyone to agree. When it comes to curriculum, they can say when things aren't being learnt, like spelling, but not all parents would be able to say what children should be taught in the high school.

Parents should be involved in the management of the school, but curriculum is strictly the teachers' area—they're the experts.

With regard to student participation, the parents were evenly divided on this issue as far as school management was concerned—two were for student involvement and two against. Most of the parents felt that the students should, however, eventually have a say on the curriculum.

Parents and students should have a say in how the school spends its money. The school that my children went to in Auckland was really well set-up with a swimming-pool, indoor sports centre, the works. This was all provided for under the self-government system for schools. The children could learn so many other things, not just the academic, while they were still at school—it's not like that here. Students have a good idea of what they can and can't do, so they should have a say in the curriculum.

Even as old as thirteen, children would not have the experience or be mature enough—they would just have a sort of tunnel-vision towards their own needs. The teachers and the parents have a broader vision and can take a perspective which will include all the children.

It's a very good idea for students to have an active participation in the management and curriculum, both in primary and high school. After all, it's for them and they know what they need. They should have at least a forty percent say, if not more.

Only the parents and teachers should be concerned with the management of the school, but the children should have a say in what they want to learn by the time they reach high school.

With regard to the role of the teachers, these parents saw it as a partnership. They tended to speak of the roles that the teachers, the students and they themselves as parents all had to play in the student's success.

Children need a good teacher, but the parents have to enforce that they do their homework, otherwise they'd just play all the time. I answer their questions if I can, when they ask. A school council would be valuable to evaluate the teacher's performance in what they're doing for the children, and the children's performance in relation to the teacher.

It's basically up to the child. Discipline must begin in the home, but if the parents provide support and make sure the child does their homework, and if the teacher does their job, then it's up to the child to succeed or fail.

In order for a child to achieve, the discipline needs to start from home, with time set aside for homework, so it's a joint responsibility between teacher and parent.

The student has to do their bit, and the teacher has to relate to the student, so failure is between the two. The parent should support the student with their studying, by providing the right environment.

Responsibility for Schooling

Three of the parents felt that the responsibility rested with the teachers, but only one chose to enlarge upon this. For the fourth parent, the home environment itself was ultimately stronger than that of the school.

The teacher has the ultimate responsibility, the parents can only support and help.

It goes from the Department of Education, to the teacher, to the student, and affects everyone who participates. But the home environment affects the child more than the school environment does.

Parents of English Speaking Background

Educational Aspirations for Children and School and Parent Roles in meeting Aspirations

Four of the parents mentioned the HSC as a specific aspiration for their children, one, while not mentioning the HSC, spoke of tertiary studies and one spoke simply of 'a good education' and 'a knowledge of the basics of life'.

I want them to achieve basic skills in Maths, English and Science, but more importantly, their HSC. My daughter wants to be a veterinary surgeon. My son goes to school and also to Technical College two days a week to do technical engineering.

I want them to get a decent education and their HSC. My youngest should be in a special school—as the result of an accident he’s easily aggravated and has been assessed so. He says he wants to be a garbage collector. My daughter wants to become a nurse and my other son a mechanic.

I want them to get a good education and a knowledge of the basics of life—although it’s not something I force. I’m in favour of Other Approved Studies. Both my children are doing Greek in the primary school, and it’s not compulsory.

I’d like them to get their HSC, because you can’t do anything without it today. It’s really up to them and their own abilities and skills. In primary school they should really concentrate on the basic 3Rs and just touch on other subjects, but it’s in reverse now. There’s a lot of social oriented subjects, which are too much for eight and ten year olds.

At the very least, I want them to get basic skills in Maths and English. Some children find it too hard in high school, but as long as there is an HSC, I would like them to get it. They are growing up already with Vietnamese as friends, and it is good multiculturally, but I would prefer that they were taken out to separate classes for Vietnamese.

I want the best that they can achieve. They can’t expect great marks, it’s too hard for them and the hours are long. My eldest is in teachers college, at the University of Technology. My son in Year 11 wants to be a veterinary surgeon, but he’s having trouble with his subjects now so we will just have to see what happens.

Only two of the parents were content with the schools’ efforts, the other four had critical comments to make.

We’ve only been in the area a short time, but we’re happy with what the school is doing.

The school is doing all I want for my children.

It doesn’t prepare them for what’s out there. There’s not enough non-academic stuff for the less bright ones that are good with their hands and not good at paperwork. It could be the fault of the teachers—who’s to know ?—physics and chemistry are hard. But learning difficulties have to be dealt with by the teacher when they’re pointed out. Teachers can sweep the less quick under the table.

They are not learning as much as they could—their spelling is atrocious.

We are pleased with the teachers at the primary school. There is a wide range of nationalities amongst the children and the teachers do a good job. They are keen to help, take an interest in the kids and don't seem to give up. But even HSC leavers looking for work that I've encountered in my job have poor writing and spelling and maths, so the whole system isn't working, beginning in the primary school.

We're not as happy this year. In Queensland it was more strict and the children had homework every day. Our son doesn't get homework now, or perhaps he's not bringing it home. He says that the teacher sets exercises and if you don't finish, you do them the next day, but I think it should be homework. I got him to write a letter to a new pen-friend the other day and was appalled that he didn't know where to put full-stops or capitals. The report card says that he mucks around too much, but the teacher should call if there are any problems. I know he needs constant attention, that he needs to be pushed. He's said that he can't understand the teacher's own English.

With regard to what they as parents could do to assist their children, these parents generally mentioned checking up whether homework was being done. Several felt that by high school the work was beyond their reach.

I can't do anything to help them in Maths, although English hasn't changed. My daughter studies hard, but my son in Year 10 does his homework at school in his free lesson, and seems confident in himself to know what he has to. I used to sit down and go over stuff with them, but they don't want me to any more, they say it's okay. They're a lot more independent and self-willed now.

By making sure they do their homework, and helping them get it done. By spending time with them and by going on excursions and up to the school. It's good for them to get homework—it prepares them for high school.

Not much, unless we check on their homework for spelling and things, because by high school, the work is out of our reach—unless it's a story or something. Science and Maths are out of reach. The eldest son helps the younger ones and tutors them in some things, and encourages them to come and tell him if they need help. They do a couple of hours study or revision or homework every night.

I used to give spelling tests and get them to read at home. There is not much time to help. But things aren't taught the same way. You can come up with the right answer, but the kids say it's not because it's not done the right way. They name things differently [in Maths, mostly] and spell differently. My son hasn't had any homework in Year 6—I actually wrote a letter about it—and the teacher said that it wasn't his personal policy to give homework. But when my son gets to high school, he won't be prepared for it.

Make sure they do their homework and co-operate with the teachers. Try and sort out problems before they get too far. The teacher tried to give a

particular pen that I'd given to my child to another child. I went up to the school to sort it out, but the teacher over-ruled me by giving it back to the other child later. You've got to watch out for the bullies.

I can't help like a teacher—but I can help with tables and stuff okay. I used to help with a spelling list when my son was tested. If he got homework, I'd have a fair idea of what he was doing and be able to help. I write out the alphabet for my daughter on paper. I spell, say, Tuesday, and get her to pick out the same letters—but I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, whether to use small letters or capitals or both.

Parent's Personal Experience of Schooling and Perceptions of their Children's School Experience

The majority of parents remembered a less permissive and more regimented school system, with little parental involvement.

There was only one teacher. There was the cane and you'd get detention. There'd be some school function about once a year. The parents didn't have much to do with it.

I enjoyed it. It was very disciplined and regimented—you always had to wear your uniform a certain length. The teachers were good. They went slower and took time to make sure that every student knew the different sections. My parents attended on open days, but as they both worked, they weren't involved much with the school.

The basic skills were the main emphasis. The teacher stood in front of the class and delivered the message. They didn't explain in depth and the kids weren't allowed to have a point of view. It was much more disciplined, and the parents weren't very involved with the school.

I hated high school and would get out of it by saying I was sick, but it hasn't affected my getting office work. I'm good at spelling and maths. My husband used to have sport in primary school, and we think that every school needs it in some way, not just as a carnival. They should have proper Physical Education or a football side.

The subjects weren't as hard, but it was very disciplined. I went to a Catholic school.

With regard to their children's school experience, two of the families spoke of the friendlier, more equal relationship between teacher and pupils, and another of the lessening of disciplinary measures. Others felt that both students and teachers were being rushed through their various syllabuses.

There is a teacher for reading Greek and a wider range now with much more choice. There are always excursions, and things on at Christmas and Easter. The discipline is much the same, although now there is no actual disciplining—so they can learn more easily.

It's not as good these days, there's a very low standard of learning capabilities. My daughter's teacher is really good, she's wonderful with kindergarten, but ground duty is not kept as it should—people could just walk in and pretend to be teachers.

The subjects are at a higher level now, but you could only know about the teaching style if you were at the school. We discipline the boys at home and all the reports say they are a pleasure to teach. You can speak to your teacher better, more easily now, especially the higher you go in school. It's more person to person, as equals.

Maths is entirely different now—the kids understand my maths, but not their own. I can't help them with their homework, they have to find someone else.

My daughter has trouble with her maths and it's the same questions all the time but she doesn't like to ask her teacher because he's too busy with the others at the top of the grade. She asked for a transfer to a lower class to keep up, and the teacher refused, saying that it was better to be in the top ten of the class than first in a lower class, but she's still confused.

They are a lot friendlier with their teachers—there goes your discipline—but there must be a happy medium. They can ask questions now, which is good, but lack of discipline leads to lack of respect, and it begins in the home. Still, kids aren't taught respect for teachers early enough, and teachers are pushed through too quickly, they don't get enough practical teaching. There is also some sort of peer group pressure from the school to question the discipline from home.

Responses to the question about how their children learnt best were quite diverse, but two parents mentioned the re-enforcement given to the memory of matter that had been read, through the act of writing it out. Another parent spoke of the effect of pedagogical experiments.

For the first three years our daughter had the same teacher and there was no rote learning—they only learnt the end result of the tables, 2, 4 and 6. It was only good in general knowledge. But now they're trying rote learning again and the boy is okay, he is doing alright because now they're learning across the table, twice one is two, twice two is four. So they try these things out, and if they're not working, they do something else.

They need discipline, they need to be pushed, and organised sport would be a help.

My eldest says that the only way you do learn something is by writing it out, just reading it's not enough.

There is a lot of interference now for kids, with TV and activities and parents working with no time. But subjects should be more defined. The

discipline at Fort Street is lax—they seem to think that intelligent children are mature, but that's not the case.

The classes are too big. Teachers don't have enough time with kids. It's not as personal, and so they can't take time to sort out problems.

My son can take it or leave it and he'll be happy to leave school. My daughter writes and re-writes until she's happy in order to learn.

Current Involvement in Children's Schooling

These parents said that, for the most part, they were more involved with the more social occasions organised by the schools—only two of them alluding to the parent/teacher interviews.

I don't go very often—I used to go for the first couple of years, but I don't like talking in front of a lot of people.

We've been sent surveys, where we've had to cross out a list of things for priorities. My husband insisted on the 3Rs—but has anything changed? There is the occasional fete, concert nights, sports days. If we can get to things we do, but we don't do too much. The school is always asking parents to go to P&C meetings. And there is the parent/teacher interview, which can be in the evening or the afternoon, where they let you know about problems. They point out the good and bad things. Our youngest had been having some problems reading, so we tried to help, and there was an improvement.

There has been a concert with other schools at _____, and a sports day at _____. We haven't heard from the primary school about a fund-raising drive for the end of the year. We've been to a sausage sizzle with the kids to buy a game for the school. I don't go to P&C meetings, I don't know why, but I will help with other things, and providing stuff.

The sports carnival, once a year. I used to go more often, in primary school.

Just enrollment—and the argument with the principal and the teacher about the pen. No other meetings yet.

I was more involved when they were at primary school, as I used to work at the canteen. I used to attend specific meetings, but not the parent/teacher evenings, because the children had good reports so there was no need. I used to find notes in their bags long after they had been sent out—they'd usually tell me on the day when they were already doing something.

These parents also claimed to feel part of the community of their children's school, even if they did not visit the school often, but two alluded to a segregation of language groups.

I work night shifts and haven't met any of the other parents yet, although I've met one of my children's schoolfriends—but it's early days.

I drop in to the classroom to see how they're going, and can go in half-yearly and at the end of the year to talk to the teachers, but if they're having a hard time I can tell and I check it out.

We don't mix socially very much. The Greek, Vietnamese and Portuguese stay in their own groups because of language. There used to be a community centre round the back of the school about ten years ago. It had child-minding play groups and other classes in photography and pottery, but it was government funded and eventually got the chop. The children's schoolfriends are welcome, they come and go. At the concert put on by all the schools in the area, the children were integrated and all sat together, but the parents segregated into their language groups.

I talk to a few of the other parents, the Australians mostly, and took a cake in for my daughter's class. I've known some of my son's friends from the age of two and a half, when my husband started training them for football. A bad lot had come at first—they didn't like the discipline and he'd had to put his foot down. My son doesn't say much about school, you have to ask him, but he is involved in sport.

Yes—I don't need to go to the school, but I know other parents and my children's friends through soccer.

Implications of Devolution of School Budgets and Management for Parent Participation

Only one of the families had heard of the plan, but three of them argued for a central authority rather than local governing bodies.

We did hear of it in passing, but can't remember the details. You need a central body in the education system—not a lot of little centres deciding differently on what should be bought and taught.

It's not good just to cater for the needs of areas. English-speaking kids would be disadvantaged in _____ because the area is not Anglo. Only in the last two years have Anglos been given work to do while the Greek and the Vietnamese are doing their own languages. Ethnic groups' interests will be for their own languages and cultures to be taught, so one group will suffer. We need an across-the-board education for everybody through a central curriculum.

I hadn't heard about it—but would the council know enough to hire teachers? Business people's ideas would be different from the school's,

and parents wouldn't necessarily know either. Teachers seem to know less these days themselves—are their courses shorter?

I haven't heard, but it would be good to have local business people involved—but they might like the power and that might not be good for the school. I don't know whether it'd be good for them to be able to hire and fire teachers—there wouldn't be agreement, for one thing, and the school would end up with only one sort of teacher when they need variety.

I didn't know, but I think it's a bad idea. Schools should be run so that every kid is taught the same thing so that if the kids change schools, they won't miss out and will still have the same knowledge.

I haven't heard about it. I think that it may be better if all schools are run from the one source, not running themselves. Lots of little bosses doesn't seem too good—one boss is better. But unless the system is tried, we won't know. Won't teachers get tired of it? Would parents turn up? The same people would keep running it and they may have nothing to do with the kids.

I hadn't heard, but I think it's a good idea, because it will bring the school closer to the kids and the parents. They'll be able to know what's going on without decisions being made over their heads. And they'll have the opportunity, the choice, if they don't get involved, that's their problem.

Extent and Role of Participation Possible for Parents, Students and Teachers

Parents were concerned that those with the appropriate qualifications should determine curriculum and spoke of the need to concentrate on 'the basic skills'. Several spoke of not being listened to when they did voice their opinions.

I wouldn't like to say, because I don't go to P&C meetings or to school meetings. If you don't go to regular meetings, then you've got no right to say. The parents and teachers who always go should be asked ... I'll help at home, if the teachers let me know of problems, although it is good to see parents care. But we weren't listened to ourselves, about homework and a football team. The teacher said he 'prefers to teach them more about everyday life' and lots of kids want to be in his class because they won't get homework. Real teachers should do that little bit more for the kids that aren't making it.

I would like to participate, but I'm not qualified to. And each parent has a different view—some allow kids whatever they like. It's possible that there'd be no agreement between the parents. It would be great if it did work, but it might not be the same for all schools. In the elite areas it'd be okay, maybe. Lots of kids drop out because they can't cope with the subjects offered—but they still want the basic skills in spelling and maths. School doesn't prepare kids for the workforce, although they're glad to stay on longer. I found it hard myself. If you're not up to scratch at the interview, you're wiped out, and there's less jobs these days. The kids need to be taught how to present themselves and what information they

need to take. We parents should be able to give an opinion, and the opinion of the majority should be acted upon.

Parents haven't had a great deal of experience, they haven't had these rights before—but some teachers really shouldn't be employed. It's like at work now—if you've got a beef, you go to the council, the grievance committee ... It's a democratic principle We should have a say. Kids are being taught things they'll never use. I used to learn about geography and ways to live outside—things that were useful in life. Now I have a child who can't read a clock.

Everyone should have an input, but I don't think it changes anything at the moment. Whoever has control listens, but doesn't do anything. In the science exam in Year 10, there were six questions the students couldn't answer because they hadn't had the topic. There have been a lot of casual teachers, so a lot of time has been lost. They have free periods and muck around. They have a lot of excursions all the time, and when you have two children, it costs a lot. They should be in the classroom, not wandering the state. What are school fees for?

It's up to the teachers and the principals, really. Some people can have weird and wonderful ideas. Maybe parents could participate to a degree in the curriculum, but not dominate. Children need the basics—English and Maths, but there should be extras if they want them. It shouldn't be forced.

There should be a group raising more funds for individual schools, but don't let them say what should be bought or taught. The primary school really needs to concentrate on the 3Rs. Unless parents can bring some specialisation into a school, opinions aren't enough. The principal should be able to say 'you can run our sports day, you've had the experience', but I shouldn't be able to dictate what I want taught in Australian Geography.

With regard to student participation, all the parents felt that the students had the right to voice their opinions, and some that some good could come from the school acting upon these, but on the whole, that the school should not necessarily do this.

They should be able to vote or have a suggestion-box. The school might get some ideas, but it shouldn't necessarily have to follow them.

Not in primary school—possibly in high. But not just the brainy or the good ones should be picked—pick the bad ones, too, or at least hear them out. They could have good ideas, and if they're reasonable, the school should act on them. So have a school council, for curriculum as well. Even if only one of the students ideas got passed, they'd feel good about it. They're the ones that go there, they should know.

The ethnic percentage are pulling back the learning abilities of the others. The English speakers are disadvantaged by their classmates lack of English. The parents at home do enough in their language, the school

shouldn't have to do it as well—it only muddles the children, confuses them and disrupts the others.

They should have an input. The student council only starts at Year 12, but the younger ones can tell the older ones, and the older ones the teachers. The ones that want to are responsible enough to do it. And if the majority are behind a suggestion, it should be acted upon.

Not at primary, and perhaps even at high. They should have an opinion, but the school shouldn't necessarily follow it If you mix the experience of the teachers with the new ideas of the students, then something worthwhile could happen. Students should have a voice, but not the power alone. There has to be an authority—the principal, he's finally accountable, and the executive. About three or four years ago, the kids lobbied for a radio station. It took twelve months, and the kids took credit for it, but the teachers started it and made the contacts.

They should be able to say about the teacher, to recommend, or suggest, through the student council. It would have to be an overall complaint, not just one kid, but if a whole class is losing out because of one teacher Some teachers get assigned to classes in subjects they've never taught before The school should say what the students can learn, although I've no idea why they're learning some of the things they do. But they need the basics, English, Maths and Science.

Maybe the students in Year 12 and Year 11 could—the level-headed ones.

These parents felt that it was the teachers who on the whole, had a great effect on the success or otherwise of a student, talking of 'personality clashes' and 'rapport'. Only one parent mentioned the parental role.

Kids get set ideas. Last year my son did really well, this year he's doing badly—he says he can't stand the teacher. If they like the teacher, they do a lot better. It's a personality clash and the teacher picks the kid out.

The teacher has a sixty-five percent influence—but it depends on the rapport they've got with the students. I think it could be a personal thing, but my husband would say it's the teaching. Kids look for a weakness, it's only natural, they have to assert themselves, and the teachers have to assert themselves to teach. Maybe it's a fear. If a child doesn't like a teacher or a subject, then they won't do well, but the child is interested if the teacher is interested. And some teachers shouldn't be teachers—it's a hard job, and you need a special motivation to deal with thirty kids six hours a day.

If a teacher doesn't relate and get through to a kid with a learning disability, then that kid gets swept under the carpet. It's easier to ignore the ones that need help than it is to help them, and so they end up failing. If a child tells me that they asked and that they still don't understand, I tell them to ask again, but some teachers just can't get through.

It's up to the teachers to let parents know if there's a problem. If they don't, parents think everything's going fine. Letters should be mailed, because kids might deliberately lose them. If the teachers see children falling back, they should give them extra time and attention. Parents and teachers need to work together. If the teacher gives remedial homework, then the parents can help. We would like to see the classes streamed, so that there was more equality in each class.

It's fifty percent between the two. If there's no rapport between them, it's not going to happen. Teachers need to learn more about the different nationalities, because it's going to affect the kids right out if the teacher is racist. And saying kids are unteachable doesn't solve any problems—kids are teachable, it depends on the manner.

If a kid doesn't get on with a teacher, the kid doesn't get on at school. It could be just a personality clash, but if you don't like someone, you don't try.

Responsibility for Schooling

While one parent felt that 'the principal of the school' should have the main responsibility, and another that it fell upon the students themselves, the majority of the parents thought that it devolved upon the teachers.

The individual teacher, because it's a face-to-face thing. No matter what the bureaucrats try to do, it's with the teacher.

The teachers—it's their job, they went to college. But if there is a problem, they should bring the parents in on it. Parents can discipline children by taking away privileges at home. But the teachers should sit for exams themselves to make sure they are up to the standards they should be teaching—they might have gone to university years ago and been teaching year 6 for ten years. I would have liked my son to go to high school with the appropriate skills, being able to look up a street directory and write a letter to friends, [both of these things I'm trying to teach him now].

The teachers. If the parents can't help, it has to be the teacher. They are employed to teach. But discipline comes from the home. If a child is not disciplined at home, they can't be disciplined at school.

The children, because they have to put in the effort. If they don't go to school, want to learn and do their homework, no-one is going to do it for them. In the last ditch stand it's up to them.

CHAPTER 3: SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Key Informants

This group of informants was drawn from key people in the education system involved in the implementation of policy. All turned out to be of Anglo and/or Celtic background, English speaking only, and only one had any special training appropriate to the culturally diverse student population of the schools they were servicing. All said that they had gained their knowledge of cultural diversity within schools from their 'on the job' experience.

It was evident that these informants understood 'parent participation' to be a policy advocated by those in power above them: the Minister, head office and senior bureaucrats. It was on the whole accepted as conventional wisdom that had to be acted upon. All interpreted the term broadly to mean parents participating in all aspects of schooling, spanning from a loose involvement such as receiving newsletters and going on picnics, to more formal roles such as decision making in the running of the school and curriculum matters.

The general impression provided, however, was that so far nothing had really worked to bring significant numbers of parents into DSP schools in any capacity. Nonetheless, all informants continued to advocate an increased role for parents in school and maintained that this was a correct expectation. The main explanation for this was framed in terms of democracy and the sharing of power with significant people in students' lives.

However, there was also an admission that it was the Minister for Education and the principals and teachers of schools who in fact held most of the decision making power. By implication, this left little for parents to share. Yet, despite this recognition, there remained a firm expression of belief that parent participation was necessary, important and possible to achieve in all spheres of school experience.

The justification for maintaining this position was put in terms of the general trend to devolution in schools, particularly in anticipation of the establishment of school councils in New South Wales. Few respondents chose to elaborate on any possible improvement of life or academic outcomes as a result of parent participation.

Teachers and their relationship to parents were also a symptomatic absence in the discussions and, although it was said that students could, and should, participate as equals what was elaborated upon in this regard was very ambivalent.

There was also appeared to be some dichotomy in the strategies and goals envisaged for parent participation. On the one hand there was the desire to have parents participating in the school context influencing management and curriculum directly. On the other, the school was to involve itself in the parents lives in order to know its population better and so that the school could then decide for itself how, and if, family backgrounds needed to be accommodated by school practices.

Whilst all informants were adamant that parents should participate in their children's schools, they were hesitant to provide strategies on how this could be achieved. Nor were they confident in elaborating what the expected outcome could be. In the main, the strategy proposed was to educate parents about schooling in Australia.

Community Liaison Officers

These informants were Aboriginal/Koori and of Greek, Lebanese and Vietnamese background. All those of non -English speaking background were bilingual and the ones born overseas had unrecognised tertiary teaching qualifications.

The non-English speaking background CLOs said that their role was limited to dealing with critical problems between the school and the student and acting as interpreters and translators. Also, they claimed that they were often called upon by parents to assist them in general matters of settlement such as applying for services and filling in forms. The Aboriginal/Koori informant in particular spoke of the more general need to forge more informal and social links with the Aboriginal/Koori community. She saw her role as a bridge between the school and its practices and the student's families and background.

The non-English speaking background CLOs maintained that from their experience it was clear that parents of recent immigrant background were too busy starting up

new lives in a new homeland, or consolidating dramatic life changes, to have the time to participate in their children's school. It was explained that on the whole such parents delivered their children to the school and put their hopes and trust in the hands of the school staff and their children's own application. For them, their children's successful adaptation to the school's academic requirements was paramount. For the Aboriginal/Koori community, it was said, there was a historic legacy of mistrust and distance that had to be broached. The Aboriginal/Koori CLO thus saw her priority as helping restore pride and build acceptance on both sides

The non-English speaking background CLOs explained that parents' inability to speak English was a limiting factor in participation but believed that parents were happy to be involved in social events, time permitting. These informants were adamant that, given life and work demands and lack of English, there was no way that such parents could be made to participate more. Parents, they insisted, would only turn up if there were problems. The Aboriginal/Koori CLO explained that the experience that Aboriginal parents themselves had had of schooling made them uncomfortable in the school context. She maintained that it was therefore imperative to construct an event at the school that would provide a positive experience for the parents and their children and enhance both the image of the Aboriginal/Koori community and the image of the school as a more inclusive place. She also maintained that the school did not always recognise just how hard it was to get parent participation. It was not something that was going to happen just as a result of an invitation.

However, these informants commented that the parents with whom they came into contact did have concerns of which they would have liked the school to be aware. In particular, they mentioned the social behaviour of students, their regard for education and other general matters of discipline and respect. These issues were not perceived as simply behavioural ones but factors that bore a relationship to success at school and preparation for employment. Lack of homework and testing, it was reported, was another matter that bewildered parents and appeared to deny them the means of seeing what their children were occupied with at school and how they were progressing. Aboriginal/Koori parents, it was said, were particularly concerned about the combination of the low self esteem and the apparent lack of discipline of their children's school experience that they felt was as detrimental to their achievement.

The opinion was also expressed by these informants that it was not just parents who did not know what was happening at school. They believed that, given the degree of change and innovation in DSP schools, teachers themselves appeared unable to exhibit confidence in what they are doing. This, it seemed, made their job as community liaison officers more difficult. The Aboriginal/Koori CLOs role in bridging the gap between what the school knew of the Aboriginal/Koori community, and the community's needs and aspirations, was viewed as particularly onerous because it spanned social, academic and behavioral realms.

It was clear that the non-English speaking background CLO informants had acquired a lot of valuable information about the communities that they served but their roles in the school contexts were not well defined. Consequently, they were tentative about relaying any information they had gleaned from contact with families back to the school when it was not explicitly called for. The Aboriginal/Koori CLOs role in striving to effect a change both in the Aboriginal/Koori community and the school community in general, created a double burden that led her to change her mind about the appropriateness of setting up separate Aboriginal/Koori school. From initially opposing such schools as potentially divisive and a backward step she came around to the opinion that if they set as their goal improved academic outcomes, then they might be able to serve the Aboriginal community better.

All the CLOs pointed to the fact that the greater the gaps between the home culture and the school culture the more difficult it was to involve parents in school. However they also made the case that despite the different values and customs of the students home culture their parents expected high academic results and a good job as an outcome of schooling irrespective of their participation in school matters.

School Staff

These informants consisted of principals, teachers, and an ethnic aide. The principals were of only English speaking background. The teachers of Greek, Portuguese and only English speaking background and the ethnic Aide was of Vietnamese background. On the whole, these informants interpreted parent participation as the necessary means to bridge a perceived gap between home and school which had resulted from the cultural diversity of DSP schools.

Participation by parents, it was said by these informants, should lead to improved performance. But when pressed to elaborate on the nature of this participation, it

was expressed in terms of parents being convinced about the value of school activities like swimming for girls and overnight excursions, modifying unrealistic expectations and understanding and accepting the more liberal, process oriented-pedagogy of the schools.

The principals' main concern was with parents' familiarity with the school system. They affirmed that the students were very happy in their schools but that on the whole they were not succeeding academically. At the high school there was a small number of high achievers but there also was a very long tail of underachievers. No link was made by either of these informants between what occurs in the primary school and the secondary.

The most significant strategy proposed to overcome the perceived gap between home and school was to educate parents about their role as educators in the home context. The task was seen, implicitly, as one of modifying the home culture by convincing parents to engage in activities with their children that would result in teaching them basic skills in numeracy, literacy and critical analysis.

The school's responsibility in this area was not elaborated upon. It seemed the weak link in students' underachievement was located in the home environment. Language skills were recognised as a general problem but it was said that the DSP, as an outside consultative body, was assisting them in was dealing with this.

The principals claimed that when parents did express an opinion about school practice it was mostly linked to the issue of homework, but they saw this as too hard to co-ordinate from the position that they were in given that each teacher was free to make a decision on this matter. It thus appeared a more feasible strategy, under the circumstances, to seek out ways in which to train parents as 'pedagogues' in a general sense than to attempt to respond to their expectation for specific homework linked to specific subject matter of classwork.

The high school suffered from high truancy rate which was of great concern to the parents. It was explained by one principal that whilst the students were very happy with the social side of their school experience, they were not enamoured by the learning process and thus chose to extend time with friends outside of learning context.

The primary principal expressed the opinion that the pre-school experience of children was a critical formative period. Incorporating parents of non-English speaking background into the school culture as soon as possible was therefore seen to be very important. The need to value the new process pedagogy was also stressed, and the problems associated with enabling parents to understand it: in particular the accepted notion in the school that it is more important to know the process involved in solving a problem, or tackling a task, than getting the right answer or producing a standard, accepted outcome. Reporting to parents was perceived to be another dilemma. It seemed that there was difficulty in making parents familiar with interpreting their child's progress by the school's preferred method of showing samples of work generated in various lessons. It was said this had worked well in a previous school where parents were all of English speaking background and schooled in Australia themselves. Again, the main solution suggested here, involved 'training' of parents to participate more effectively in their children's learning experiences.

All staff interviewed, however, were on the whole cynical about the practical reality of parent participation, given the poor response they had experienced during their careers.

It was the teachers' understanding that parents delivered their children to them as educators and expected them to then be responsible for their academic progress. Parents, they maintained, trusted the school but sought feedback on how their child was progressing. On the whole, they, like the principals, mostly wanted the parents inducted into the culture of the school so that they could understand and accept what the school was doing.

All admitted that they got very little back from the community liaison officers appointed to serve their school and were not clear about their role. The ethnic aide interviewed felt unable to inform teachers about the expectations of the parents with whom they came in contact, claiming that, like the community liaison officers, time limitations, and a sense of being outside of school structures, compelled them to deal only with critical problems.

All informants also believed that the students and parents of their school shared unrealistic expectations. One of the implicit aims of getting parents into the school was to make them lower their horizons so they more realistically fitted with what the teachers knew about their children's chances in the academic and professional

stakes. On the whole, however, there was a great deal of timidity and confusion expressed about their role as professionals, despite stating they understood that parents trusted and expected much of them as teachers.

Students

These informants included Aboriginal/Koori students and students of Arabic, Tongan, Vietnamese, Greek and English speaking background.

All expressed the belief that school was a place for learning and most had high expectations for completing the HSC, further tertiary study and embarking on professional careers.

Most put friendship and good times high on the list of the attraction of school. They included friendly teachers, but there was also much criticism of teachers. Most of it centred on resentment of authority, accusations of an unwillingness to offer help, alleged exhibitions of favouritism, prejudice and victimisation.

Most of the informants expressed the opinion that their parents were not able to avail themselves of what they considered to be adequate provision for participation because of lack of English or work commitments or feeling that the school really did not listen to them any way so it was a waste of their time. But most also said that they would like their parents to be more informed than they were about how their school functions and the general world of schooling as they experienced it.

A majority said that what they enjoyed most was learning new things. And, despite obvious difficulties with written expression, most said English was the subject they were best at. This was followed by Maths and Geography as the other areas nominated as 'best subjects'. The subjects that most said they were worst at were (also) Maths and Science. History was also regularly selected as a 'worst at' subject. Aboriginal studies also got a mention as a favourite subject as did a complaint referring to the absence of such in 'Life in the History'.

In response to questions about student participation, most replied in terms of their own responsibility to learning and choosing appropriate subjects. When asked to speculate about what decisions they could be involved in, there was much uncertainty with wide ranging responses from 'nothing' to 'more excursions'.

Likewise, in relation to questions about parent participation, parents were viewed as participating as a result of making children attend school and providing encouragement. It was generally accepted that parents were too busy to do more and that or that they felt that they did not belong there. Some students however also had the impression that their parents were generally ignored by the school on the occasions that they did express an opinion.

Teachers, it was believed, were the ones most responsible for what went on in the classroom. But it was teachers and students jointly that were considered responsible for educational outcomes. Teachers and parents were also coupled as responsible in this regard but, on the whole, the students accepted responsibility for the outcomes of their schooling.

Parents

These informants were Aboriginal/Koori and of Arabic, Tongan, Vietnamese, Greek and English speaking backgrounds.

With the exception of the parent group of Tongan background, who placed more emphasis on basic skills training and preparation for survival in the workforce, most of the rest of the parents had high expectations for their children and were hoping they would gain entry into tertiary education and the professions. This was particularly so for the group of Vietnamese background.

The majority of parent informants expressed the opinion that they should be able to expect a similar standard of education in any school. They held the Department of Education and the teachers responsible for the quality of education in schools.

Most felt that their paramount role was in the home and with values, discipline, encouragement, and paying the bills to support schooling. The parents of non-English speaking background tended to place a lot more responsibility for educational outcomes on their children's endeavours and family values. In contrast, those of established English speaking background only were more critical of the school's contribution or lack thereof. Aboriginal/Koori parents spoke of their children's responsibility to their learning but also spoke of the school environment and teacher expectations as playing equally critical roles.

Parents of more recent non-English speaking background immigrant backgrounds wanted to participate in school mainly around issues of values, religion and

languages other than English. On the whole they believed they should be able to leave other areas of schooling to the professionalism of school staff, policy makers and the government. There was, however, some bewilderment expressed at what was perceived to be a withdrawal from that responsibility by teachers at Australian schools. Aboriginal/Koori parents were concerned that teacher did not 'give up' on their children and were anxious that their children did not have the same kind of school experience that they themselves had gone through. One parent however, who had gone to the same school as her child expressed, the reservation that she was 'not sure if things had changed'.

All informants expressed a willingness to be part of the social world of the school, but did not feel they had the expertise or time to be involved either in management or in curriculum matters. Most of the parents accepted responsibility for their children's education but understood this in terms of the contribution they made by valuing education, encouraging their children and supporting the education system. They did not see this responsibility as being extended to managing the school and they were wary of the power blocs that could emerge within the proposed school councils. The Aboriginal/Koori parents in particular spoke of the importance of encouragement and the overseeing of homework though they, like many of the other parents, lamented that their children did not get as much as they thought they should.

Not many of the parents blamed the school for their children's failure, although most believed that the teacher played a pivotal role in this regard. But they did have expectations of the school's social mission to prepare their children for success in the world and to do so in a professional and equitable manner. The non-English speaking background and Aboriginal/Koori parents in particular expressed the belief that school should 'push' their students more.

Concern was expressed very forcibly about lack of homework, discipline, uniforms and respect for teachers. All the parent groups, even those who expressed support for curriculum diversity, complained to some extent about what they perceived to be a lack of authority and low academic expectations. Requests were also made for more feedback about progress and contact in relation to problems students might be facing. The safety of their children whilst at school was another issue of distress, particularly for the Arabic and Greek families. Perceived prejudice and discrimination within school experience in general was of concern also to Aboriginal/Koori parents.

Because there was such a strong belief expressed on the role of the family with regard to discipline and values, there appeared to be an implicit assumption that if there were problems in the school it was because other children came from families with looser values and that these children affected others. It seemed that the cultural diversity of the school populations, whilst applauded, tended to exacerbate the unfamiliarity that families have of each other in any school community. The result was that parents could not expect from schools a clear commitment to values and practices that reflected those in the home of any particular group. For example, a number of parents from Vietnamese, Greek and Arabic speaking background lamented that teachers did not show the same strictness towards their children as they did at home. Aboriginal/Koori parents were also concerned that the historic effects of separation and discrimination on Aboriginal/Koori identity were not always understood well, either by the Aboriginal/Koori students, or the school, and this was a factor that had to be taken into account in dealing with behavioural and scholastic issues.

It was very clear that on the one hand parents wanted to be supportive of their schools because they had an abstract respect for education and believed that it was the vehicle by which their children could acquire, not only academic skills for further education and vocations, but the means by which they were socialised into civilisation. The Aboriginal/Koori parents in particular also acknowledged, and were appreciative of, the efforts that their children's school had made to make them feel comfortable about participating in school events.

But, on the other hand, many of the parents had practical experiences that made them suspect that their abstract ideal was not coming to fruition. Given the deep conviction that all the families displayed about their own contribution to the making of their children, it thus became difficult for them to sort out who or what was responsible for the social and educational outcomes that their children were involved in. Even a mother of English speaking background, who had more ready access to the answer, questioned whether maybe teacher courses were shorter nowadays and that might explain what to her seemed to be inadequate teaching. In the light of this it is hardly surprising that a parent of Vietnamese speaking background was led to assume that the teachers in Australia just did not love the children but took the job only for the money. Aboriginal/Koori parents also put of emphasis on the personal relationship that their children had with the teacher and how this affected their performance.

Aboriginal/Koori parents were also questioned about their attitude to the setting up of separate Aboriginal/Koori schools. The majority of those interviewed were opposed to separate schooling because it brought back memories of segregated schooling that was poorly equipped with inappropriately trained teachers that they believed had resulted in the inferior educational and life opportunities that had been afforded them and their peers. For those who opposed, as well as those who approved the idea, the central rationale was educational performance and job futures. School was not only seen as a site of cultural experience but also as a vehicle for achieving academic and professional aspirations. Those willing to give it a go, or ready to wait and see, were wanting to evaluate if separate schooling which combined a cultural inclusiveness with high academic aspirations, could better prepare their children to improve the lot of the Aboriginal/Koori community in the land of their birth: to deliver what was their due with dignity, firmness and more salient role models.

Conclusions

Differences of opinions around ethnic/cultural groupings attested to the fact that there are communities of interest within each group of informants. For example, the children and parents of Tongan background expressed similar desires for survival skills from schooling and the families of English speaking background tended as a group to express more common criticism and dissatisfaction. The Aboriginal/Koori respondents desired to reclaim their place in the wider community and were anxious that the historic legacy of discrimination might be still having its effect on their children.

For both parents and students, social contact and communication seemed to be operating more within ethnic/cultural groups than it was for the school population as a whole community. This was particularly noticeable for the families of Greek and Arabic speaking background for whom it seemed news about school events and even exam results travelled via family channels rather than directly from school contact. For the Aboriginal/Koori families also it was key intermediaries in their community that formed a bridge between the school and the families.

The evidence from this research indicates also clear gaps between what parent participation policy expects, what schools believe they can accommodate and what parents believe they can offer. Moreover, the transitory nature of the school

populations of DSP schools and the cultural unfamiliarity with the school system of Aboriginal/Koori families and non-English speaking background families, made reliance on community participation for significant curriculum planning a difficult challenge leaving the schools in a constant state of limbo and indecision.

There was a clear demand from parents, when they are asked their opinion, that schools be more explicit about their methods and goals and that they then back these up with obvious professionalism, compassion and dedication. Within such a framework they felt that they could make choices better and be able to comment on, and influence, what they understand to be rather than what they speculated to be.

Nonetheless, despite these gaps, there are certain generalisations that can be made. For example, all groups of informants agreed that:

- parents were not experts in the school context;
- parents in general and Aboriginal/Koori parents and non-English speaking background parents in particular, did not have a history of participation, or involvement in DSP schools;
- lack of proficiency in the English language was a limiting factor to participation;
- non-English speaking background families were working hard to establish themselves in new homeland and had little spare time;
- parents in general and Aboriginal/Koori parents and non-English speaking background parents in particular, had an implicit trust in the education system and expected it to deliver excellence and deliver it equitably;
- only a limited participation role for parents was seen as practical or achievable;
- parents in general and Aboriginal/Koori parents and non-English speaking background parents in particular, need to know more about the culture of schooling.

Suggestions for achieving greater parent participation from the informants associated with the education system, in the main, involved inducting parents into the culture of schooling. This involved for example appreciating:

- that learning happens while playing and that the liberal process pedagogy currently the norm in DSP schools was regarded as superior to traditional methods;

- that extracurricular activities like swimming and excursions were held to be an integral part of an holistic approach to learning; and
- that subject choice had been widened in order to be more relevant to the different abilities of students and to be more motivating.

Suggestions were also made about the need for the school to know more about the cultural background of its student population, essentially in order to inform the widening of the curriculum and to make teachers more sensitive to factors that affected the identity and self-esteem of their students.

Parents likewise wanted the best for their children from school. The expectations they wanted addressed centred around the issues of:

- discipline;
- homework;
- respect for learning and school;
- student uniforms and the dress of teachers;
- reporting and evaluation procedures; and
- information on the problems their children were facing;

The students in the case study schools were obviously happy and had a high sense of self-esteem but they were not obviously achieving their high aspirations. Given that both the school and parents speak of any partnership between them as being in the best interests of their children success, socially and academically, what is the central issue that needs addressing?

From the kind of responses that the informants gave, particularly the key informants and the teachers, there seemed to be a tendency to explain some part of school performance for students in DSP schools, particularly of non-English speaking background, in terms of the home environment and the 'disadvantage' that these children accrued as a result of their parents inability, or lack of time, to be more directly involved in home learning experiences that pertain to success at school work. There was a leaning thus towards the desire to develop a strategy that trained parents to 'teach' their children more systematically at home in order to redress and/or supplement classroom educational experiences.

Also, since 'parent participation' was being required more and more in order to prepare parents for involvement in the management of schools both at an

administrative and academic level, such training it was deemed could serve that purpose also. Both these goals fall into the realm of adult education and have been traditionally beyond the resources and skills of the school. If both these goals are to be regarded as educationally desirable and politically necessary then obviously they will make significant new demands on resource allocation, priorities and time, particularly to ensure that the groups of parent that this study has focused on can really be included.

Consideration needs also be given to the very different historical experience of independent schools in NSW who are already 'devolved' from state departments of education and the relationship they have with their parents. Parent involvement at such schools begins firstly, with the commitment of very substantial fees paid and secondly, with the acceptance of very particular academic and social practices within the context of explicit traditions. This sort of 'parent participation', which also seems to be accompanied by very high levels of family presence at school functions, is achieved without consulting parents or involving them in the management of schools which is left to experts. Are there any lessons to be learned here, positive or negative?

When it comes to the participation of Aboriginal/Koori parents and those from non-English speaking backgrounds the issue is even more complex and the goal of inclusion both more imperative yet more arduous. A Victorian ministerial discussion paper (1989) on participation of parents of non English speaking background in Victorian government schools concludes:

It was clear that parents from ethnic groups were confronting barriers to their participation in schools. In fact, the majority of parents from all four ethnic groups, except the parents in the Greek inner suburb established group, were not participating.

and,

Where parents in the study were participating in formal school structures, they expressed serious reservations about the effectiveness of these structures. It was clear that the structures and pathways for NESB parent participation were either non-existent, unsuitable or too weak to ensure that parents were able to take an active role in schools.

The South Australian report, *Education for Cultural Democracy* (1984) describes two effects of the non-participation on the part of non-English speaking background parents:

One is that decisions on priorities, policies, resources, equal opportunities, curriculum and organisation tend not to address the needs of the 25 percent of students from minority ethnic backgrounds. The second consequence of exclusion of members of minority ethnic communities is that decisions about all aspects of schooling are being made from a monocultural perspective.

The movement, and its accompanied debate, to set up separate Aboriginal schools within the DSP locality is also evidence that some families within the Aboriginal/Koori communities are dissatisfied with the schooling of their children and the limited sense of community that currently prevails for them within the existing system. However, the goals of this movement cannot be viewed as exclusively separatist or cultural ones. Rather, the initiative emanates from the desire to deliver to Aboriginal/Koori families the promise of schooling that all parents and students expect in contemporary Australian life, as evidenced in this study.

Notwithstanding any of the critical questions that remain unanswered, the imperatives of devolution cannot be ignored. All state schools need to respond to the fact that school councils do exist and will grow in Australia as a means of managing schools. It is important, then, to ensure that a large number of people are not excluded because of unfamiliarity with the school system, language barriers or current discourses on schooling.

The task thus is primarily twofold:

one, to inform parents of the school's culture;

and two, to make the school more finely attuned to the expectations of parents.

The dialogue between the parents and school, however, has to allow for changes to mainstream orthodoxies, even ones of pedagogy, as a result of the process of participation and cultural negotiation.

However, a third and more practical imperative is manifest. Over the years, inquiries into parents' expectations have produced a number of recurring themes. If the concept of parent participation is to be taken seriously, then some of these have to be addressed directly no matter how difficult they might appear to be, or how contrary to the wisdom of government departments. You can't just keep asking parents what they want and then use the results as the basis for targeting the unlearning of that want. The call for homework is one such repeated expectation. Homework is no trivial matter to parents. They see this as the most viable way of

being informed about what their children are learning at school, of gauging whether their child is able to do it and observing the degree of their application. It is the pivot between school and home.

Finally, it was a clear and unanimous desire on the part of the each parent group in this study that their children not only succeed academically through schooling but that their experience of living at school, which after all consumed a great deal of the time, was one which was grounded in emotional and physical safety. They expected that the school, as a matter of course, would provide deep and broad social links with their student's families in order that a sense of shared values about community and mutual commitment to high educational aspirations could be taken for granted.

It was clear that the parent and student informants of this study, who represented the great cultural diversity of DSP schools, want their school to recognise their common needs and aspirations as well as to be cognisant of what distinguished them from each other. Indeed, the latter was not viewed as an end in itself but as the basis to prepare for the former. They held the school responsible for its professionalism and expected it to teach well and in a caring manner. Then they could fulfil their role as parents, encouraging their children and ensuring that they in turn fulfilled their obligations to their own learning.

CHAPTER 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

Option A. Orientation for Teachers New to DSP Schools

- Training package—structured activities plus stimulus inputs.
- Based on data from report, historical and sociological information.
- Using DSP consultants and materials production staff.

To date, the training of teachers in regard to cultural diversity, such as it is, has often been to immerse them in the details of cultural difference in order to encourage tolerance and understanding. The practical outcome of this has been the diversification of curriculum, attention to matters of self esteem and strategies for intercultural understanding, addressed to both staff and students.

The findings of this study suggest that it is important also to include in such training understanding of Aboriginal people's history and social participation and immigration in Australia and its relationship to, and impact on, mainstream institutions like schooling. Professionals in such institutions are confronted by significant challenges to their values, priorities and goals. The concept of parent participation does not exist in a cultural vacuum. If schools are to sort out what their response to this will be, given that they cannot assume an homogeneous community and familiar expectations and aspirations, they need to be provided with an opportunity to explore the various factors that impinge. For example, it is necessary to reconsider the core values of a school, the pedagogy it employs, the subjects it allocates more time to, the degree of positive discrimination that might be required in terms of staff-student ratios in classes of large linguistic diversity, and how these practices are regarded, understood and accepted by the populations they serve.

The negotiation process that is required of institutions that draw their populations from a vast variety of backgrounds, and require of them democratic participation, is very complex and in many ways without precedent. The initial willingness for a partnership between schools and parents can quickly turn sour if the two parties are not aware of how fundamental the challenge to traditions and firmly held wisdoms might be, for both sides. It is not enough to express what each side expects and desires. It is also necessary to be able to locate these within the forces and processes that produced them. And then it is necessary to be able to assess what is possible,

what compromises might need to be made, what sacrifices will be involved and how to ameliorate their impact, what discoveries can be made, and so on.

It is a lot to expect teachers to discover the answers to these questions on the job whilst fulfilling their role as pedagogues. The expectation of parent participation is relatively new and made doubly difficult within the context of an immigration program that continues to fill classrooms with waves of new students whose parents are not familiar with the Australian education system. Added to this also is the ongoing negotiating with growing and changing Aboriginal/Koori aspirations. A training package for teachers responding to these issues is thus a national imperative.

To include:

- what parents are saying about their aspirations for their children and their expectations from schooling;
- understanding of Aboriginal peoples' experience and social participation;
- explanations of the effects of contact between Aboriginal peoples and different waves of new settlers on each other;
- familiarisation with Aboriginal peoples' contribution to Australian progress and development, particularly in mining and agricultural industries, as well as in arts, sport, and literature;
- explanations of the contribution of Aboriginal people to the development of Australian social policy, national identity and reforms in law and education;
- explanations about the value of migration and the fact that migrants are invited and officially accepted by governments to be part of Australian society because they serve the general economic and social needs of the population at large;
- investigating the proposition that one of the gains in receiving skilled migrants in the eighties and nineties is the fruit of overseas education systems that emphasise discipline, application and structured, abstract learning, and the effect this has on productivity, efficiency and creativity;
- discussions about the saving accrued to Australia's education bill by the importing of highly skilled people schooled by other nations;
- investigating the challenge to school practices by expectations that emanate from Aboriginal social practices and experiences outside of Australia;
- discussions about the imperative of intercultural understanding and community.

Option B. Orientation for Parents

It is also clear that there is a strongly perceived need for parents to become more familiar with the culture of schooling in order to be able to assess the extent to which their children are being served by the school in which they are enrolled.

Given the notorious expressed difficulty in getting parents into school, this goal might be better achieved by targeting realms that Aboriginal people and those of non-English speaking background already use to gain knowledge about what is going on in the world.

To this end a pilot project is proposed involving a selected media, an adult education provider and a targeted school. The staff of the DSP would undertake to supervise the bringing together of such a group to make a multi-use product that would be integrated into the activities of each realm.

The product would deal with information about the culture of schools in Australia.

For example:

- the structure and function of schooling;
- the roles, responsibilities of departments, administrators staff and students;
- the school's expectations of communities and parents;
- the social context of schooling and its goals;
- the academic context and ;
- the relationship between school culture and home cultures.

The form of the product/s would be decided by the groups involved but it could entail community information advertisements, or a series of documentaries or narratives, or a series of magazine or newspaper articles.

It is envisaged that these could then be utilised in a number of ways by the groups involved, either as one-off special features, or media releases. Alternatively, they could be integrated into an adult teaching unit, or utilised as part of school-parent forums and the like.

It would also be possible to construct contexts where elements of Option A, the teacher orientation package, and Option B, the parent orientation materials, could be combined to allow for a dialogue between parents and teachers about the accuracy and relevance of each other's training and knowledge.

Option C. Homework

This is by far the most insistent demand of parents surveyed in this project.

A pilot project targeting one grade and two subject areas, in both the primary and in the secondary school (e.g. Years 3 and 7 in English and Maths) is proposed.

The staff of the DSP would co-ordinate a materials project to produce homework and to then evaluate how well it functions as the pivot between home and school.

The schools would need release time to allow teachers to work with DSP staff to produce model homework. The project would need to take into account:

- what parents could deal with in terms of time and resources;
- how to construct tasks that were self-contained and achievable in any home context;
- how homework could complement lessons without making the progress of classroom lessons dependent on its completion;
- a procedure for marking homework that did not put undue burden on the teacher.

DSP would have to monitor and report on:

one, how responding to the demand for homework impacts on the planning of classroom lessons and core curriculum;

two, how the provision of homework impacts on parents' knowledge about school and their child's progress;

three, how homework impacts on the general performance of students given that it anticipates an increase in 'time on tasks.'

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